



Session One Transcripts All are Welcome

The phrase 'all are welcome' is characteristic of the Methodist Church: you'll find it on Methodist noticeboards and notices all over the place.

It says something important about who we are as Methodists, and our experience and understanding of God. At its heart, 'all are welcome' is a statement about God's limitless love and grace and it is therefore about so much more than human hospitality.

It speaks of the never-ending boundless love of God for every person, no matter who they are, and God's constant invitation to, and promise of, salvation. It's that assurance of God's ceaseless love and grace for us that guides, inspires and shapes our life together as part of Christ's Church.

The Methodist Church's desire to welcome all is a part of its own response to God and its witness to God's love in Jesus.

This involves seeking to be a community marked by love and care for one another and for all whom it encounters, especially the marginalised and hurting and those who have been outcast in some form.

Methodists are committed to working for justice, honouring diversity and prioritising the welfare of the vulnerable in all aspects of their life together: in the ways we do things, in who we prioritise and in where we put our energy.

But the phrase 'all are welcome' immediately becomes a little problematic if we use it to talk about particular places – not least because some have not experienced the Church in this way. While 'all are welcome' makes for an aspirational idea, it requires commitment and hard work if it is to become even a partial reality.

A community without boundaries can be unsafe, particularly for those who are vulnerable, in all kinds of different ways. Belonging to a community means that we are part of a people with different needs and vulnerabilities, and it is important to recognise where

the activities of some people are appropriately limited for the sake of the well-being of others.

Welcome for all doesn't mean that there are no boundaries to the Church's inclusivity and hospitality, and it has long been acknowledged that there is a need for discipline for those who damage the integrity of the Church and obstruct human flourishing.

Boundaries need to be established not just to prevent harm but also to enable the Church to be faithful to its identity as the body of Christ. Any individual church or Christian community has only limited time and resources, so there is always a choice about how to use them, and who's flourishing they will help facilitate.

The Methodist Church has long had a commitment to welcoming people who have experienced abuse, including to listening and responding well; but these commitments have not yet become part of the fabric of church life and there is still much work to be done.

In 2021 the Methodist Conference adopted the 'Theology of Safeguarding' report, marking it as a significant report in the life of the Methodist Church, and this report is also significant in giving priority to the experiences and theological thinking of those who have experienced abuse.

It not only challenges us to think about how we embody a welcome for those who have experienced abuse within our worship, structures, care and ways of relating, but encourages a deep listening to experiences which might challenge and deepen understanding of God.

As that report reminds us, attention to those who have experienced abuse (in all its forms) helps to make a community that enables the flourishing of all.

Good and Bad Welcomes

Vivien Almond

A good welcome will be somebody who's come to the door and says to you, "Lovely to see you." You know, maybe they ask your name and explain who they are, explain a little bit about the church, see where you would you like to sit. And that would be to me, perfect.

Let me sit where I want and not push.

One of the worst things is at my mother's church – my mother always called it the St Andrews Hug. When you went into the church, people just hugged you straight away, whether you were a stranger or not – so rude! That would be a really bad welcome.

So the opposite of that – even if a person wants to shake your hand, but if you want to hug someone, you ask them, you don't just hug them.

Just coming in explaining about the church, being polite and welcoming. That's all people need.

Helle Sewell

I went to this specific church. Now the church had pews and I struggled sitting in a very hard pews, so I always look for a cushion in the church, and I noticed this particular pew. And in that pew, there was a cushion and I thought 'Perfect! They have provided for people just like me to sit on a cushion', and so I took that seat.

And then after a while, while I was just looking around, somebody came up to me and says, "I'm sorry, can you please move out of this seat?"

And I said, "Why is that?" and they say it belongs to somebody who's just arrived and they want to sit in their seat, on their cushion.

So I just got up and found a different place. There was no question and I had my fingers crossed that I wasn't sitting in somebody else's seat.

I think it's really important to remember that a welcome is a joyous activity, so you need to be relaxed and happy about what you're doing. And that gives you calmness to understand, perhaps, that there are lots of different people that come through the doors with lots of different experiences.

And their experience might be something that's negative, and maybe their desire when they come through the door is just to be welcomed – perhaps by asking their name, maybe not.

But also showing them the way into the church and understanding that it could be that they just want to come and sit in the church, rather than speak to somebody.

Aimee Haynes

Part of what drew me to the church that I'm at in Newcastle, is that we have a welcome statement where we unequivocally welcome everyone in the church. No matter what they do, no matter who they are, or what they believe.

I think the main thing for me in that welcome statement is that we make it very, very clear that we affirm and celebrate those differences that bring us all together. And in my experience, that's not something that a lot of churches do.

When I finally found a way that felt like a family; that felt like home – partly due to the welcome that I received – it really fostered a space for my faith to grow, for myself to develop as a person but also as a believer. And it became something that infused every part of myself within that congregation; and gave me the strength and the courage to develop a little bit more and to speak a little bit more about who I might be as a child of God.

I think the best welcomes that I've seen are people who go out of their way to say 'you are you and that is beautiful'. And 'you are welcome here'. And not just people who say 'you're welcome here if you are a Christian like this, this, this and this.'

I feel like those grey areas, those kind of the silent minority of people that might feel like they don't belong, we really need to reach out to them.

I mean, that's what Jesus did. That's what our example is in the Bible – to reach out to minorities, to reach out to people who are broken or lost who are neglected, who society says don't fit.

Even a simple thing – the first time I went to the church, the minister already knew my name, because my partner was already going to the church and the minister greeted me by name and said, "How are you?" Rather than kind of a "*who are you?*" It was a "how are you?" And that's something that our welcome team has adopted.

We often asked "how are you?" instead of *who*, or how we often focus on the person's well-being.

Alan Jordan

A good welcome looks honest, looks prepared – well prepared, looks like the people who are welcoming mean what they saying and doing, are engaged and are happy and respectful and so welcoming.

A real welcome needs planning – it isn't something that people do necessarily. Good Christians, good people, are not necessarily good welcomers; they need to have a prayer meeting to start with.

Before the church starts, they need to support each other. They need to be listening for each other. So you need a prayer meeting and a briefing.

Okay, so what's going to be happening in the service? Somebody asked that question. You give them the answer. So that's the preparation.

And critically, after the service, the greeters need a debrief and a prayer time. And the debrief needs to be 'that worked' and 'that I didn't do that very well. But I noticed you did. So why did you do it that way? I like that.'

Well, next time around, I learned from that.

So it's developing skills and showing me how to do it right.

It's got to be done right.

Publisher's Note: Scripts may not be exactly as spoken in the films, but are always substantively so.

If you have any questions or comments about the God Welcomes All course, please contact gwa@methodistchurch.org.uk