



## Session Four Transcripts The Impact of Abuse

Church life, Christian worship and theological thinking are rich in symbolism.

Much of the language and symbols we use to talk about God are second nature. They can be so familiar that we don't really think about them, and there is often little time to stop to and wonder about how these might be understood and used by others.

Symbols are, by nature, representative, and people might understand them in different ways, bringing their own experiences and perspectives when seeking to understand them.

In worship, the hymns and songs we sing, the prayers we say, the language we use, the symbols we refer to, the practices we adopt, all say something about who we are and what we believe. Often the language and imagery have developed over time, originating in very different contexts from the ones in which we use them now. We may think we know what they mean, but alternative and sometimes damaging meanings and interpretations are possible, and unexplained embedded practices can be mysterious and threatening to those who don't know their history and purpose. Words and phrases that are taken for granted may leave some people feeling marginalised, unheard or rejected.

For example, if the songs and hymns we sing are constantly packed with images of losing ourselves, drowning in God's love, of giving up one's 'self' – what message might that give to those of low self-esteem or self-worth or those who are trapped in a cycle of abuse? What effect does that have?

Symbols and practices convey meaning and provoke reactions, but we can't predict what those might be for any

individual, and sometimes these might be ones of pain or distress. For example, Mothering Sunday can be profoundly excluding, or the sharing of the Peace uncomfortable or disturbing or even terrifying for those who have previously experienced inappropriate touch.

It is the Methodist Church's intention to value every human being as part of God's creation and it seeks to embody the love and grace of God in its structures and ways of relating. Safeguarding is a part of this: it's one way in which members of the church demonstrate their care for each other and all whom they encounter as they are part of creating safer communities for all. Safeguarding is not something we do because we have to but because it relates to the heart of Christian faith: it is integral to the mission of the Methodist Church and a part of its response and witness to the love of God in Christ.

But building a community of love and grace is hard work.

It can be deeply disruptive as it involves paying attention to difficult and deeply painful experiences, the exercise of mutual accountability and personal responsibility, a preparedness to listen to difference, to challenge and be challenged, and a willingness to change. It requires all members of the church to consider the power they have in different situations, to be aware of the language they use and images they rely on when talking about God, and to think about how familiar theological themes might be heard and interpreted by those who are vulnerable or who are experiencing, or have experienced, abuse.

Yet all of this not only helps to protect the vulnerable, but signals that the church seeks to be a place which enables human flourishing. It helps us to pay attention to what God's transforming love and grace mean for our life and worship together and our witness in the world.

In all that we are and say and do: where is the good news of God's love through Jesus, and how are we revealing, sharing and demonstrating it?

## Symbols, Liturgy and the Ongoing Impact of Abuse

### Vivien Almond

One of the most challenging things in church is when you sit down. I always enter a row or whatever, wherever, it is, and I always face the door because I need to know what escape route is. I couldn't get locked in the middle of the pew. But the times people come up and say, "Can you just move as someone wants to sit there?" And if I say, "Well, actually, I'd like to sit here", instead of just saying, "Oh, okay, sorry," instead of going away, they say, "Oh, but we need this space."

And they push and push and that is so challenging, because just leave me alone! I want to sit here. Why can't I sit there, you know?

And also things like sharing the peace. You come into a church, maybe you've not been before, but even if you have, it's a new place, and people share the peace – they come up and they want to hug you. I don't want a stranger hugging me. It's not that I'm unsociable. It's just that I've had a really bad experience with people touching me and I don't want that anymore.

Stuff like that and the peace is really difficult.

One of the hardest things for many, many years – for me – was saying the Lord's Prayer. Especially, it got worse when my dad died because the words we say are, 'Our father in heaven'. And people say, "Oh, yeah, but we're talking about God." But all the people who knew my father in church would say he's gone to heaven.

So, yes, you're thinking of God, but to people who have been abused by a parent who's now died and everyone thinks they've gone to heaven, it's really awful.

Why can't we say just say 'Our God in heaven'? But if you challenge that, people say, "Oh, well, that's what's in the Bible. We got to say it like that."

Excuse me, it's the twenty-first century! The Bible was written in the second or third century. Life has moved on. People are acknowledging abuse, and it's time that the Church stood up and said, "OK, we do need to change this."

There's lots of words in liturgy, and there are lots of hymns that are quite abusive. And you go to churches, and they say: 'we're brothers and sisters'. Well, actually, no, thank you very much.

But that's not how it should be because one in six people are abused in some way. So, if you've got a church of 30 people, you've got a lot of people in there who could have been abused.

So start thinking about it. That's what we are asking.

### **Aimee Haynes**

There are these grey areas to do with anything: partners, gender expression, employment, faith, that people and that churches institutionally seem to have developed prejudices towards. It's not every church and it's not a broad brush.

We are wrong. It just is that we're not conscious, in some cases, of who we are welcoming and how we're welcoming them.

### **Alan Jordan**

Mothering Sundays are a nightmare for me and I have had struggles for most of all my Christian life, that's a long time really, with Mothering Sundays.

There's lot of things – Father's Day.

People need to be aware that somebody walking through the door is not necessarily singing from the same hymn sheet as they are. They may not feel loved. They're certainly not necessarily happy. They may well be confused. They may well be there not knowing why they're there. They may well be there looking around churches and comparing.

*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](mailto:gwa@methodistchurch.org.uk)