

# The Methodist Church Inclusive Language Guide

*For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.  
Galatians 3:26 (NRSV)*

## Introduction

### Why do we offer this guide?

As Christians, we need to have the courage for conversations that can sometimes be difficult, to recognise that we sometimes exclude people, to listen with humility, to repent of any hurtful language and to take care with how we listen and what we say or write, in the Spirit of Christ. Good, open, encouraging conversations, based on careful listening, are central to all positive relationships, including those within the Church. Using careful and positive language is key to effective ministry and mission.

### What is meant by inclusive language?

Speaking, worshipping and writing in an inclusive way is about engaging positively with as many people as possible. At times we might find that people feel excluded or harmed by something we say, not because we have any bad intentions, but simply because our turn of phrase was automatic, or unconscious. When we make an effort to use inclusive language, we are simply trying to be more aware.

God has created all human beings as unique and diverse from one another. We can expect our congregations and communities to be made up of many, many different expressions of individuality rather than assume, or expect, anyone to be 'just like us'. This guide signposts organisations with specific knowledge and experience of including particular groups of people who have been, or still sometimes find themselves, marginalised or left out of mainstream language. Though general guidance will be provided here, it's a good idea to consult with people who have often been marginalised or excluded for whatever reason, to see what they say about how they would like to be addressed and included in language (see 'Organisations that may help'). If you have accessibility needs for these pages, such as alternative formats or languages, please send your request to: [publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk)

### How might you use this guide?

It might help with conversations and with learning and understanding people from different communities than your own. You might be someone who already appreciates having these sorts of conversations. You might be someone who has found someone else's language offensive and this guide may support you with raising these issues. You may be a preacher or minister who wants to ensure your ministry is accessible and open to everybody. Someone may have told you that something you have said is offensive or

exclusive and this may help to explain why. You may be producing a document to be circulated to a church audience and want to ensure you represent the Church as well as possible.

As our understanding of one another evolves, so should the language we use to communicate. We are all certain to make mistakes at some point if we are brave enough to have honest conversations. This guide may be helpful as a tool of reference, or as a starting point for conversations within the Church on how language can be a part of living out Our Calling as Methodists.

## **Learning Together**

If you hear something within the Methodist Church that you find difficult or offensive, please assume 'good intent' until you are sure. This could be due to generational differences, to ignorance of your own life experience or, sadly, it could be due to prejudice.

If you feel safe and confident enough, do think about explaining why that language makes you feel excluded or disrespected. Sometimes questions can be useful, such as "What makes you use that particular word?" or "Do you realise that expression leaves me out?" If you would like support with challenging exclusive language please speak to your minister or pastoral worker, or contact [equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk). If you have any suggestions or comments on this guide, please email [publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk).

## **Why is this important?**

Part of the work of being a justice-seeking Church is about recognising and acknowledging that harm has been done to marginalised groups in the past, not just by wider society but at times by the Church itself, and that it is the Church's responsibility to make amends for this.

It is crucial for our communications to be sensitive and inclusive because for such a long time, some groups have been marginalised and/or demonised by common culture. The Church can lead the way in acknowledging the hurt caused to marginalised communities by living out the 'good news' that God includes us all, whoever we are.

## **Some general principles**

### **Be guided by the individual**

In all areas, it is important to listen to how people identify themselves and be guided by that.

Keep in mind when reading the information below that how an individual identifies themselves should always be respected, above and beyond any guidelines.

## **People, not problems**

We want to avoid labelling people or groups of people, or reducing them to the sum total of an experience they may have been through; examples might be 'drug addicts' or 'the poor'. Always put people's humanity first: 'people struggling with addiction' or 'people on low incomes' is preferable.

It is important to note that while we promote person-first language, (ie a person who is disabled), there are some people and groups who prefer identity-first language (ie 'a disabled person'). It is important to listen to how people identify themselves and to use this language.

## **Try to avoid negatives**

Even when it is not intended as such, negative language such as 'regardless of gender, ethnicity...' or 'in spite of...' can be dismissive. This terminology emphasises the 'otherness' of the people being referred to.

## **Be open to correction**

You may use words you consider to be inclusive, but find that someone corrects you. Be open to listening to the reasons they give you for not using the word or phrase you have used and understand that their thoughts are as valid as your own. We will all make mistakes but it's much more important that we try to take on board people's preferences and risk being corrected than not try at all.

## **Human relationships come in many varied expressions**

There is infinite variety in the way that God's creation is expressed in human life. This is worth bearing in mind as we speak and write. Terminology such as 'husband' and 'wife' may sound inoffensive but it makes assumptions about a family or personal life that is not the reality for many people.

The words 'parent', 'partner' and 'child' are a good place to start. 'Carer' is also a neutral yet understandable way to refer to the primary carer of a child, who may or may not be their parent.

## **Guidance on inclusive language for some specific groups**

This section of the guide alphabetically lists some of the main concerns that may arise when trying to use language more consciously in our spoken and written communications.

## Ageism

Try not to make assumptions about what people's interests, opinions, or life experiences may be based on their age or demographic. There is no need to refer to people's age at all unless it is relevant to the meaning of what you are saying or writing. If writing about people in general, 'older people' is preferable to 'old people'. Or general terms such as 'retired people' or 'retirees' is acceptable if it is relevant to the context. Try to keep references to age factual: 'people of working age/school age'. Once again, humanity comes first.

## Anti-racist language

It's worth considering the need for the Church to take a restorative approach to any communication on the subject of racism, slavery, antisemitism and islamophobia and attempt to speak or write in a way that is not simply 'not racist' but is actively 'anti-racist'. Language is very powerful here. The words used to discuss power, privilege, racism and discrimination mean different things to different people. Language can uphold systems of white supremacy or encourage breaking it down or questioning it.

In the Methodist Church, we are encouraging use of 'ethnicity' rather than 'race' as we believe there is only one human race. However, we also need to remember that everybody has an ethnicity and it helps to be aware of our own ethnicity and our distinctive differences as we talk with one another within the Church.

It is important not to describe people by what they are not... as this implies a 'norm' which is not helpful. Often BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) has been used in public contexts but some individuals may not like to be referred to in this way. It is a catch-all term which highlights minority experience within the UK yet also fails to distinguish between different ethnicities.

### ***For example:***

*Some people will now refer to themselves as Black British, African British or Caribbean British in recognition of their African ancestry and their British birthplace.*

## Immigration status and those who have migrated to a different country

Our congregations are becoming increasingly culturally diverse and Methodists have varied immigration status (including students, skilled workers and dependents). Using inclusive language around immigration status helps affirm and acknowledge the legitimacy of everyone as human beings. There is usually no need to refer to somebody's immigration status, but we do need to avoid any negative language in relation to these life experiences. Those for whom English is not their first language have an additional talent that many of us do not. It is affirming to acknowledge this.

### ***For example:***

*“She speaks English in addition to other languages.”*  
**OR** *“She speaks Hindi and is learning English”*  
**RATHER THAN** *“English is not her first language.”*

## Antisemitism

Antisemitism is any belief, policy or action that discriminates against or incites hatred towards Jewish people, by either race or religion, or caricatures Jewish people and culture. This can include denying the right of Israel to exist, or judging it by standards not applied to other nations. The correct spelling is antisemitism (not anti-semitism or anti-Semitism). It is important not to use a hyphen here, despite what our computer spell-checkers might say.

## Islamophobia

Islamophobia refers to any belief, policy or action that discriminates against or incites hatred towards Muslims or which caricatures Muslim people and culture. Some English speakers tend to mispronounce ‘Islam’ with a ‘z’ instead of an ‘s’. ‘Izlam’ is an Arabic word that refers to ‘getting dark’ while ‘Islam’ means submission, as in submission to Allah/God. Similarly, the word ‘Muslim’ (one who has submitted to Allah/God) is to be pronounced with an ‘s’ sound rather than a ‘z’. The correct spelling is Muslim (NOT Moslem, which used to be widely used interchangeably but is not preferred by most Islamic groups). The term ‘Mohammedists’ is considered offensive by Muslims as they do not ‘worship’ Mohammed but follow his teaching that encouraged them to worship only Allah/God. Qur’an is the preferred spelling of the scripture among Islamic organisations.

## Disabled and Neurodiverse people

Language can reinforce negative or outdated stereotypes, or it can challenge them. As in the general principles outlined above, we suggest that people’s humanity should come first, over and above any reference to their physical or mental capabilities. So use ‘people living with a disability’ in preference to ‘the disabled’; ‘wheelchair user’ rather than ‘wheelchair-bound’.

Whereas many people are ‘neurotypical’, ‘neurodivergent’ is used to refer to people with Autism, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia.

As stated above, it is important to be led by the individual and use the language they use to identify themselves. Avoid describing anyone as ‘suffering’ from their particular condition.

In church services or events, small tweaks to language can make people feel much more included if it acknowledges that we are not all physically able to worship in exactly the same way.

It may worthwhile to note that requesting that people stand “if they are able” can create a normalised expectation that people should stand. This can apply to preachers and worship leaders too.

For some people who are able to stand but risk falling or suffering other ill-effects from pushing themselves physically, this expectation is neither safe nor sensible.

An example of language that may be used at the beginning of a service:

"During the service, some people may stand, sit or take up any other position, please feel welcome to do what is helpful and safe for you."

## Gender

### Gender-neutral language

We can subconsciously use phrases that may be misinterpreted as us favouring one sex over another such as ‘guys’ or ‘fellows’. In preference to this try gender-neutral language such as ‘folks’, ‘teammates’, ‘friends’, ‘colleagues’, or simply ‘people’! Similarly the word ‘man’ used as a verb – ‘who is manning the front desk’, for example – can make people feel excluded.

Referring to an adult woman as a ‘girl’ could be read or heard as demeaning, especially if we do not refer to men as ‘boys’.

### Gender identity, expression and fluidity

Gender identity and gender expression are two different things. Gender expression is how somebody outwardly presents themselves to the world. Their gender identity may or may not match this. Sharing your own pronouns helps to create a safe space for people to be themselves. In an online meeting, some people share their pronouns after their name:

***For example:***

*Gemma Hyde. She/her OR  
Jay Walker. They/them*

You could also share your own pronouns in conversation. However, nobody should feel under pressure to do so.

***For example:***

*“Hello, my name is Robyn and my pronouns are she/her. Nice to meet you.”*

Currently titles are highly gendered and it should be recognised that some people aren’t comfortable with this mode of address. People should be empowered to choose how they



would like to be addressed, and not feel under pressure to use a title that reveals their marital status or gender if they don't wish to.

**For example:**

People of different genders may choose to use a gender-neutral title such as Mx, or cis women may prefer to be addressed as Ms rather than Mrs or Miss.

## Non-binary people

Many cultures have traditionally held the view of gender as binary: as male or female, he or she. For individuals who identify as non-binary, their gender identity may be more fluid because they do not identify as either male or female.

Therefore, using a person's chosen pronouns is helpful as it honours their identity and humanity. Some people who are non-binary choose to use 'they/them', or something else, such as ze/hir or co/cos, while others may be open to any pronoun. Again, it's important to establish how they would like to be addressed.

When addressing a more general audience, it's helpful to remember that some of the people you are speaking to may identify as non-binary. Language such as 'brothers and sisters', while intended to be inclusive and friendly, doesn't take into account our non-binary friends. You might consider using 'siblings', 'friends' or 'children of God' instead. Similarly, using 'he or she' could be exclusive; 'they' is also accurate and acceptable.

If you are referring to a particular non-binary individual, remember that 'they' is acceptable as a singular pronoun. If this needs to be spelled out the first time you refer to them in copy, for clarity, this is fine – do so and then consistently use the chosen pronoun.

**For example:**

*Tyler, who identifies as non-binary, and uses the pronouns they/them, has lived in Manchester for five years.*

**Later on:** *"Since they were tiny, Tyler and their brother played instruments and sang in their church band."*

It's likely that we will make mistakes when trying out language that is new to us and, while it may feel awkward, it will be appreciated by the person we are speaking to/about. Try to be gracious if you are corrected and follow the person's lead in terms of how they would like to be addressed or referred to.

## Transgender people

Transgender, or trans for short, means somebody is now living with a gender identity and/or expression that they were not born with, and may have changed the pronouns they wish to use. This should be respected.

Transgender is an adjective, so therefore: “Lee is transgender” NOT “Lee is transgendered.” No suffix is needed.

Furthermore, when referring to a transgendered person, a space is required, but no hyphen, ie trans woman and trans man.

## Mental illness

It is important to be aware that ‘mental health’ is not the same as ‘mental illness’. We all have mental health in the same way that we all have physical health and, just like physical wellbeing, our mental wellbeing can move around a spectrum of positive and negative. Language can play a huge role in the stigma that is attached to some mental health conditions and so we should pay careful consideration to the words we use when discussing mental health.

As with other topics, the person should always come first and not be defined by any diagnosis or condition. So ‘people with a diagnosis of...’ or ‘people living with...’ is better than saying ‘schizophrenics’ or ‘depressives’. As with disability, using positive language wherever possible is encouraged and so try saying ‘experiencing mental health issues’, rather than ‘suffering from’.

The way language is used and perceived is dependent on the person, the context and the intention when using it. However, in general, language that is negative, that sensationalizes or dismisses mental health issues or that puts people in the position of victim is likely to add to the stigma an individual may feel. Conditions or illnesses such as bipolar disorder, PTSD, OCD and ADD are real mental health conditions that have a huge, and often debilitating, effect on the people who live with them, so we need to avoid offhand use of these terms in a trivial way.

## Sexuality: LGBT+ individuals

It is important that the Church uses language that is inclusive of LGBT+<sup>1</sup> people. Be guided by individuals and how they wish to refer to themselves and their families.

### ***For example:***

*If Gary refers to Mike as his ‘husband’, do so in general conversation and – if relevant – when writing to or about him.*

*If Gary and Mike prefer to be referred to as ‘partners’ then do so.*

Using the language that individuals use for themselves shows that we care as a Church and that we affirm them as a child of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this document we are using LGBT+ recognising that the + sign refers to many differing experiences of life, too many to mention individually. This is a reminder that we are all unique.



It might also help to bear in mind that there may be people in church who have not 'come out' and who would therefore not comment on non-inclusive language due to their personal choice not to share their sexuality openly, but who nonetheless may feel excluded by language that isn't inclusive of them.

## Queer identity

The word 'queer' and its meaning has evolved over the years. It is best known, even in the recent past, as an offensive term for homosexual. In recent years it has been reclaimed by some LGBT+ people to express their sexuality positively. It shouldn't be used about someone without their permission, but is acceptable if this is how they self-identify.

## Slavery

Slavery did not end with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Modern-day slavery is often the result of exploitation of people who are desperate and vulnerable. It is a very complex crime that takes many different forms globally. Human trafficking is a part of this problem but shouldn't be conflated with modern-day slavery. It has its own legal definition.

### Language to consider using:

Enslaved people, or people who were held captive, **not** slaves

Using 'enslaved' (an adjective) rather than 'slave' (a noun) separates the condition of being enslaved from the status of 'being' a slave. Being a slave is not the essence of a person's being; they were enslaved by others.

## Trauma and Abuse

Once again, whilst it is impossible to come up with a list of language that must and must not be used, it is vital to consider the backgrounds and potential experiences of your audience or readers. Bear in mind that people who have experienced abuse and trauma are at risk of being triggered by many different things, including language. If you know you are producing printed or digital copy for an audience that may include survivors of trauma, it could be relevant to think of language in terms of being trauma-informed. This means recognising that it is worth attempting to avoid re-triggering those in recovery by the considerate use of language.

Although, to many of us, language that describes such things as being 'encircled' or 'embraced' (for example, 'embraced by God's love') is a beautiful and comforting image, some of these words may be triggering to people who have experienced intimate abuse. You could consider more neutral alternatives such as 'surrounded by'. In a Church context this may mean considering how people feel about sharing the peace.

Those who have been through abuse have different opinions on how they may like to be referred to. It used to be commonplace to refer to 'victims' of abuse. Now it is generally

more acceptable to say 'survivor'. Some people like the term 'survivor', others do not. The best advice is to consult with those who may know your audience and/or be open and sensitive to the need to change this terminology based on their feedback.

## However...

It is also worth considering whether there is any need to refer to any aspect of a person's identity that isn't directly relevant to the conversation or communication you are taking part in. Sometimes the most inclusive way of speaking or writing about people is not to emphasise an aspect of their identity.

Even today it's commonplace for tabloid papers, for example, to introduce everyone by way of their marital/parental status and age... "Married mother-of-three Naomi, 38, from Huddersfield, said..." or to make reference to the ethnicity or religion of a criminal or suspect when it isn't relevant to the story and indeed might even influence the views of the reader.

Where it isn't relevant, you don't need to reference any kind of 'status' or current or past struggles that people might have had. This keeps the emphasis on our common humanity and our common identity as children of God.

## And finally...

There is no definitive guide to 'inclusive language'. Language, by its very nature, is constantly evolving. This guide is just a starting point, to get us talking, thinking, and sharing. If you're reading this and feel that somebody or a group of people have been left out, get in touch to let us know and we'll edit this guide to include them. We will update it every six months.

Similarly, if you would like to challenge any of the content of this guide do let us know because our language and understanding will develop as we continue in conversation together. You can email [equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk) or [publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk)

## Organisations that may help further

**ADHD Aware** [adhdaware.org.uk](http://adhdaware.org.uk)

**All about Trans** [allabouttrans.org.uk](http://allabouttrans.org.uk)

**Arise** [arisefdn.org](http://arisefdn.org)

**Council of Christians and Jews** [ccj.org.uk/about-us](http://ccj.org.uk/about-us)

**Dyslexia Association, The** [dyslexia.uk.net](http://dyslexia.uk.net)

**GLAAD** [glaad.org](http://glaad.org)

**International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)** [holocaustremembrance.com](http://holocaustremembrance.com)

**Stonewall** [stonewall.org.uk](http://stonewall.org.uk)

**Racial Equity Tools** [racialequitytools.org/glossary](http://racialequitytools.org/glossary)

**Rise: Freedom from Abuse and Violence** [riseuk.org.uk](http://riseuk.org.uk)

## References

**Conscious kid, The** [theconsciouskid.org](http://theconsciouskid.org)

**GLAAD Media Reference Guide**, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, available from  
[glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD-Media-Reference-Guide-Tenth-Edition.pdf](http://glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD-Media-Reference-Guide-Tenth-Edition.pdf)  
[accessed 01/10/21]

**Marsh, Jeffrey** [jeffreymarsh.com](http://jeffreymarsh.com)

**Prospect** 'Why is language so important in disability and neurodiversity?' available  
from [prospect.org.uk/article/why-is-language-important-in-disability-and-neurodiversity/](http://prospect.org.uk/article/why-is-language-important-in-disability-and-neurodiversity/)  
[accessed 01/10/21]

**Wamsley, Laurel** 'A Guide to Gender Identity Terms' NPR.org, available from  
[npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq?t=1633111086351](http://npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq?t=1633111086351) [accessed 01/10/21]