**A Methodist Way of Life service outlines**

**Before using this service outline,
read the notes on** [**how to use the sessions**](https://www.methodist.org.uk/mwoloutlines)**.**

**Service**

The Methodist calling to ‘Service’ contains three practices: challenging injustice, serving others, and seeking the flourishing of all creation. These practices relate to how we commit to serve people and the world around us, both near and far.

**Challenge**

**“We challenge injustice”**

**Key themes**

* God is a liberator. God always takes the side of people experiencing poverty and injustice and we are called to do the same (Isaiah 28:6).
* Around the globe and in their own local communities, Methodists are working for justice through responding to needs and campaigning for change.
* Challenging injustice is never easy – it is rare for a challenge to be welcome.
* Challenging injustice is something we can do as individuals and working together. It doesn’t have to be world-changing.
* There is a difference between helping people and challenging structures that create injustice. Both are important.
* It is important that we don’t see challenging injustice as an ‘us and them’ issue. There may be injustice to challenge, and people who are marginalised, within our Christian community. And there are many challenging injustice who don’t share our faith. We stand in solidarity regardless.

**Relevant Bible passages**

Amos 5:14-21; Micah 6.6-8; Isaiah 58:1-14; Luke 4:16-20

**Background reflection**

*Begin with a discussion question about fairness.*

“It’s not fair” is a common cry of two-year-olds and justice campaigners. Jesus told stories to people who live in a storytelling tradition, with stereotypical characters – landowners, workers, managers. In other parables we meet widows and judges, rich and poor, party hosts and party guests. Often the story has an element of unequal power.

In the parable of The Labourers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20, we think we know who the ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ are. Clearly the workers who have laboured all day have been cheated, because others who have worked for less hours are paid the same. But like the prophets of the Old Testament (eg Isaiah 5 and the Song of the Vineyard), Jesus tells a story with a twist.

In this story, the one with power chooses to be generous and those who think they are entitled – those privileged because of health, strength, reputation, or who they know – find they are worth no more and no less than everyone else. This is a shock and results in that age old cry, “It’s not fair!”

The cry of fairness can be related to two things – fair opportunities or fair outcomes. One common illustration of this difference is to imagine an adult and child trying to look over a fence. The adult is tall enough to look over, but the child is not. Fair opportunities treat all people equally – both people would be given a box to stand on.

But this would not change the outcome – the child still cannot see. While all people are equally important to God, their circumstances are not. Fair outcomes would re-distribute resources to achieve equality – both boxes are given to the child, so that both adult and child have the same view over the fence. Justice rooted in an understanding of God might go even further than ideas of fairness. What if the fence was removed entirely, liberating everyone from structural constraints, so that all can have abundant access to what is beyond the fence?

If we look again at the parable and imagine that God is the landowner, God desires that all will have abundant life (John 10:10). To pay less than the daily wage was to condemn people to hunger, even death. And so regardless of how many hours they worked, the landowner ensures there is a fair and equal outcome for all the workers.

When the landowner asks why workers are still in the marketplace at 5pm, they don’t say they didn’t want to work, they say “because no one has hired us”. We don’t know what circumstances meant they weren’t hired earlier in the day. All people are created equal in God’s image. But circumstances aren’t – money, violence, institutional racism, bias in gender, age, sexuality, disability and much more can create unequal situations.

The story makes many of us uncomfortable because our default mode is to assume we must earn our way into God’s love, or be good enough to pass some test of righteousness – it’s not easy to shift our thinking. No one can work hard enough or long enough to earn God’s love. It is given – and we see that in Jesus Christ. The God who wants all to have life, however the world measures their worth, is the same God who brings Jesus back from death to a new life, which marks the beginning of the new kingdom of love and grace.The way that the world often works, those who are chosen last are people experiencing the struggle against poverty, disabled people, members of minorities, refugees, the broken and unwanted. In the kingdom of heaven, these are the honoured guests – those who sit at the top table.

We like to think the world has changed, that things are fairer, more just. Yet in many contexts there are still people who are chosen last – considered to be of less worth because of discrimination. The moment human beings see others as worth less than themselves, injustice follows. We see this in the killing of George Floyd and the shooting of Jacob Blake. We see this when women’s refuges are daily having to turn women and children away because there is no room. We see this when children, women and men die attempting to cross rivers and seas to claim asylum. Living as people who recognise that every other person is precious to God calls on us to challenge injustice.

At the heart of most injustice is misuse of power and an attitude of scarcity – that there is only so much to go around, and I lose if someone else gains. This can be hard to challenge, particularly if we feel powerless to change anything. But though the deck may be stacked against us (or those close to us), we are all still able to act. It is never just someone else’s responsibility. We all have a part to play. And God entrusts those in power with a special responsibility for upholding justice.

When did you last cry “It’s not fair!”? Was it because you found out that people in your community are going hungry? Was it because asylum seekers and refugees are left to live without the means to support themselves and their families because of Government policies? Was it because you saw a person treated unfairly because of their colour, sexuality, disability or gender? Was it because you, or someone close to you, was treated unjustly? God, whose nature is just, yearns for justice in the world. What makes you want to challenge injustice?

**Further notes**

* Page 6-7 of the Conference Report, [A Justice-seeking Church](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/30703/justice-seeking-church-guide-to-report-1023.pdf), describes how the world might feel if God’s justice is present and how it feel where it is lacking, plus what it means to seek such justice. How would you describe this?
* A visual image for the fence metaphor (including its removal) is available [online](https://miro.medium.com/v2/resize%3Afit%3A720/format%3Awebp/0%2A6LevAbFoFBRi3O9P.png). It’s worth noting that a flaw in this metaphor is that the inequality is presented as an innate quality of the child – they’re too short. But as all people are created equally in the image of God, we must be mindful that inequality stems from social and institutional situations and attitudes towards people, not by how they are made or loved by God.
* The parable in Matthew is followed by Jesus predicting his death and his resurrection. The first will be last and the last will be first – the Alpha and Omega will become as one of the lowest of the low, dying an ignominious death. There is a link between the unfairness of what is done to the Son of Man and the theme of our parable – one who deserves everything, yet has everything taken away. As in the parable though, there is a twist – the desolation is not the end of the story – life will come.
* Grace is often uncomfortable – we find it hard to accept that God loves us, just as much as God loves those we hold in high esteem. It can be even more uncomfortable when we realise that God loves those we disregard or find despicable just as much as God loves us. Surely we have earned more love, more grace than those who hurt others, damage creation or don’t see the world the way we do?
* We might pat ourselves on the back and say, “We have God’s grace, there is nothing left to do.” And, in terms of earning salvation, we would be right. However, we know from Scripture and from Methodist teaching that we are called to respond to God’s grace – as recipients of the gift, we are transformed by love and grace – God’s Spirit works within us to bring about a new life, a fuller life, a life in which it troubles us that others are treated unfairly.
* A common way of differentiating between helping/serving people and challenging injustice is this parable: You are walking alongside a river when you realise there are people in the river drowning. You can see a place further up the river where they have fallen in, and where other people are also continuing to fall into the river. Rescuing people out of the river is an act of help and service. Travelling upriver to fix the problem so that more people don’t fall into the river is challenging injustice. Both are of equal importance, and which action we take will depend on our circumstances and opportunities, and on our personality and gifts.
* God calls all people and nations actively to work for peace and justice, liberation and transformation. No one person can solve these issues alone, but we can work out together how to respond to the injustice we see locally or globally – by letter writing, actions of generosity or joining campaigns. Each one of us can play a part in building the kingdom of heaven that Jesus described in the parable – not to earn our place there, but to celebrate that all are welcome.
* God calls us to live in hope and in ways that reflect God’s character and the pattern of God’s kingdom. So, seeking justice involves honesty and truth, and may demand protest and resistance, restitution, forgiveness, reconciliation and ultimately transformation.

**Song and hymn suggestions**

Where is the love? – Black Eyed Peas

God of justice, Saviour to all (*StF* 699)

Hail to the Lord’s anointed (*StF* 228)

Love inspired the anger (*StF* 253)

Oh freedom – freedom is coming (*StF* 697)

Send down the fire of your justice (*StF* 413)

Show me how to stand for justice (*StF* 713)

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! (*StF* 186)

When I needed a neighbour (*StF* 256)

And see [Walking with Micah](https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/seasons-and-themes/themes/walking-with-micah/walking-with-micah-as-evangelists/) on *StF+*

**Creative activity suggestions**

Create a display of different types of injustice (this could be using photos representing people impacted by or challenging injustice, or writing words on big bits of paper). Around each, write ways that you are currently challenging this injustice, either as individuals or as a community. In another colour, write down any opportunities to challenge injustice where you aren’t currently, but you feel God might be calling you. Look at the links in the ‘ways to respond’ section for ideas.

**Discussion questions**

* What do you think is ‘not fair’? (Depending on ages this could include anything from a friend who has more sweets than you, to warfare.)
* Who would be the last to be chosen to work in the vineyard today?
* What issues of injustice or unfairness in your community and in the world (small and big) are you concerned about?
* What are you doing in response (as individual followers of Jesus and as a Methodist church community and family)?
* What do you need to help you with keeping this commitment?
* **In what ways are we powerful/powerless when it comes to an issue of injustice (eg bullying, homeless, human trafficking, poverty, racism)?**
* **Look at pages 6-7 of the Conference Report,** [A Justice-seeking Church](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/30703/justice-seeking-church-guide-to-report-1023.pdf)**. Where can you see signs of God’s justice, or where it is lacking? Where are you seeking justice, as individuals and as a community?**

**Prayer ideas**

Find a ‘token’ to represent different marginalised groups who are treated unjustly or prevented from living life to the full (such as a photo, a campaign button, an item of food or clothing, a toy boat, etc).

Hand them out and ask people to pray (out loud, silently or in writing) for people represented by that token. Pray also for discernment from God in how you can challenge injustice as individuals and a community.

*Explore creative ways to pray with all ages, using the Methodist prayer cards, available as*[*a printed pack*](https://www.methodistpublishing.org.uk/books/EGIPC22/intergenerational-prayer-cards)*for meetings and events,*[*a PowerPoint*](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/28465/intergenerationalprayercards-smaller.pptx)*for church services and meetings or*[*as a PDF*](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/28466/digital-prayer-cards-131222.pdf)*for digital use.*

**Ways to respond**

* Explore [methodist.org.uk/Challenge](http://methodist.org.uk/challenge)
* Explore what it means to be a [Justice-seeking Church](https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/social-justice/a-justice-seeking-church/). The Methodist Church is supporting the Let’s End Poverty movement, calling for a UK where poverty can’t hold anyone down. Find out how you can get involved at [letsendpoverty.co.uk](http://www.letsendpoverty.co.uk)
* Visit [jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://jointpublicissues.org.uk/) to find out more about how Methodists and other Christians are responding to injustice – and how you can get involved.
* Visit [allwecan.org.uk](http://allwecan.org.uk/) to learn about how the Methodist relief and development charity addresses issues of injustice worldwide and find out how your church can give generously.
* Check out [secondhelpings.org.uk/about-us](http://secondhelpings.org.uk/about-us) to see how Stamford Methodist Church welcomes all, no matter their circumstances, to have food and to build community.