**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)**.**

**Our Calling: Worship**

The umbrella term ‘Worship’ in Our Calling has three different dimensions: as well as worship in the traditional sense, there are also prayer, and noticing God. These practices might be called ‘breathing in’ God; they are intentional in connecting us to God and inform how we live in the world.

**Notice**

**“We notice God in Scripture and the world”**

**Key themes**

* God is near and findable, but not completely.
* The Bible is an ancient collection of writings of different people’s experiences of God at work in their lives. It helps us understand and experience God for ourselves.
* We can also notice God in science and nature, our relationships with others, in our work, in books, films, podcasts, and other leisure activities, and in world events.

**Relevant Bible passages**

Luke 24:27; John 5:36-39; Romans 1:20, 15:4-6

**Background reflection**

*Looking for the God who is already looking for us*

Have you ever played hide and seek with a child who is slightly too young to understand the rules? You stand in the middle of the room and say, “Where’s so and so?” and the child leaps out and enthusiastically cries “Here I am!” The child wants to be found.

This is how God responds when we look for God. God wants to be found. The Bible tells us of a God who does not just reach out to individuals, but who is active in the world and tells us of a way of life that is meant to be lived. Isaiah urges us to go out into the whole world, with joy. Some people find God more easily in the world, others find God more easily through Scripture. Although we do not always know the reason for this, it is important that we find ways to share our different experiences and encourage each other.

Theologian John Calvin said that the Bible is like a pair of spectacles: by looking through Scripture, God’s presence and action in creation comes into focus for us. Theologian John Stott talked of ‘double listening’, with a Bible in one hand and newspaper (or smart phone!) in the other. These are important reminder that we do not read Scripture to learn facts, but to change how we see our lives and the world around us.

*This could be a good time to ask a discussion question about hidden treasures.*

*The Bible*

When we read the Bible, we are not primarily trying to learn more facts, but encounter God and to be transformed. We want to respond to the gracious God who always seeks us. Isaiah emphasises a living word – how do we seek God in the Bible and the world, in a way that is faithful to Isaiah’s vision?

Bible study can be a joy, but also a struggle, and people have wildly different experiences of encountering God.

*Share your own joys and struggles. You may also wish to ask people to share theirs. Thank everyone, without passing judgement.*

*The world*

Many people talk of having spiritual experiences in nature. Others see God in films or in art. Science, politics, newspapers, books, podcasts and sports can all be ways that people connected with God. This is different from noticing God in the Bible – it is more focused on our own experiences or the thoughts of other people, rather than words from ancient times. But it can be just as important in our spiritual lives.

And yet, we will never find God completely. There are times when God may feel far away, or too big or intimidating to comprehend. Each faith journey is personal, but even the greatest saints have spoken of times when they struggled to sense God’s presence. Most of us experience times when the Bible seems to speak directly to us and other times when it is confusing, frustrating or just plain boring. When we find passages difficult, it matters that we have a good sense of the ‘grand truths’, the picture of who God is, which we learn from all of Scripture.

We can then look for what God is doing in the world around us – and seek to join in.

**Further notes**

* What is the Bible? It can be referred to as a book with an overarching story, or a library of books each with their own narrative and purpose. It is filled with different genres (from history to fable, from poetry to biography) and is interpreted by different people through different lenses, different degrees of literalness, and with very different application. Very few people read the Bible in its original languages, and even those people bring their own biases, interpretations and experiences. This can be a good thing – we can learn a lot from someone else’s understanding of a Bible passage. But we also need to be aware of our own, and others, input. This can also help us to be more understanding when we disagree.
* It is important to acknowledge that the Bible contains passages that most of us find difficult, and which we need help to interpret. Remember: God is seeking you. Founder of Methodism John Wesley eventually changed his teaching on assurance of salvation because he met faithful Christians who had never had the heart-warming experience that was so important to him.
* The Bible was written down at a time when most people could not read. The vast majority was originally intended to be heard or read in community, and reading the Scriptures together, through preaching and in small groups, has always been at the heart of Methodism. This is a challenge to the whole church, not just individuals. Have you tried listening to Scripture, perhaps to longer sections than are read in church? It can be interesting to compare different translations or, if possible, look up words or sections in the original languages. Free online interlinear Bibles are available: [biblehub.com/interlinear](https://biblehub.com/interlinear).
* Isaiah talks about God as someone who “will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7). He also speaks of the word of God as being fruitful and having a purpose. How does that help us seek God in the Bible and the world? Wesley talked about interpreting Scripture “according to the grand truths which run through the whole”

(Notes on Romans 12:6). Our overall sense of those ‘grand truths’ matters in how we read particular verses. We seek the God of Jesus, God who is with us in everything. We seek the God who cares about justice and mercy and the God who left the safety of heaven to be with us in our struggles.

* The idea that God seeks us before we seek God and that everything we do is a response to God’s grace, is central to our understanding of the gospel. Yet sometimes this gets lost when we talk about our practice of spiritual disciplines.
* Paul’s letters often greet multiple people, and would have been read aloud to the community. Various passages in the Old Testament (such as Nehemiah and Ezra) show the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) being read out loud to the assembled people. Isaiah uses both the singular and plural tense when he addresses his audience. English hides this, and we tend to read ‘you’ as always meaning ‘you singular’, the individual.

**Song and hymn suggestions**

As – Stevie Wonder

From the highest of heights (*StF* 48)

In the darkness of the still night (*StF* 109)

It’s there in the newborn cry (Your grace finds me) (*MP* 1312)

Listen for God who speaks in our hearts (*StF+)*

Looking back through it all (Skies) (*SoF* 2954)

Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders (*StF* 158)

O God, you search me and you know me (*StF* 728) based on Psalm 139

O Lord, our Lord, throughout the earth (*StF* 112)

**Creative activity suggestions**

* [A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1987/fo-statement-a-lamp-to-my-feet-and-a-light-to-my-path-1998.pdf) explores different Methodist approaches to the Bible. Write the following two sentences on pieces of paper, place them on opposite sides of the room, and ask everyone to start in a line between them, according to how much they agree with each statement. Ask a couple of people to share why they placed themselves there, and how you can learn from each other. “I find it bewildering that the Bible has been interpreted in so many different ways” / “I find it exciting that the Bible has spoken in such different ways to people in different times and places” (taken from page 651).
* Engage with the Bible in a different way to usual. If you normally read a message, use a video or audio recording to present a Bible passage or story. You could use a TakeTime reflection (the one on the [Notice commitment page](https://www.methodist.org.uk/notice) might be useful, or there are others on [each of the commitment pages](https://www.methodist.org.uk/visiteverystation)) and ask different people to share their reflections – where is God in the story? Or be ambitious and organise an improv performance, with props and volunteers of all ages from the congregation.
* Alternatively, explore dramatic interpretations like *The Bible* or *The Chosen* (available on streaming platforms) or summaries like those available from [the Bible Project on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/%40bibleproject). While such dramas always come with authorial and directorial interpretation, they can also help us to experience things in familiar stories in a
new way.
* Give everyone a piece of paper (ideally A3 but A4 is acceptable) and some coloured pens. Ask them to draw a timeline of their life, noting down all the important moments (eg marriage, meeting their best friend, starting a new school or job, moving house, leaving home for the first time, retiring, having a child/grandchild).

With another pen, add the moments when they are aware of noticing God in their life. One way of thinking about these moments is as ‘glimmers’ or ‘micro joys’ – moments when you get a sense of joy, peace, or connection to God’s depth and truth, in the middle of everyday life. Write down what happened, and whether there are any similarities in those moments (eg you were always outside, reading the Bible, in family settings). Encourage people to think about what difference this might make to the way they expect to notice God in future. Encourage one or two people to share something from their timeline, and pray for everyone.

**Discussion questions**

* Where have you noticed God recently? This might be a moment of divine peace, a ‘God-incidence’, something unexpected happening, an answer to prayer, or many other things. How is God revealing Godself to you? How might God feel hidden, and what might we do in response?
* Which part of the Bible is important to you right now?
* How would you describe the Bible to someone you met on a bus?
* What does it mean to you to look for God in the world? In what ways is this easy? In what ways is it more difficult?
* How could you encourage other people to notice the hidden treasure of God’s presence in their life? Watch the Revd Gill Newton, the Methodist President 2023-2024, [address to Conference in 2023](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98u03lmhzGU&t=1788s) for more.
* How can we be the kind of church in which people who do not feel confident with the Bible can find the help they need?
* How can we as a community seek God in the Bible and the world? How do we welcome spiritual seekers to join us in this?
* What are your ‘grand truths’ that lie at the heart of the Bible’s message? If you had to sum up the ‘master story’ that the Bible tells, what would you say?

**Prayer ideas**

* Read together a prayer from the Bible and respond with your own prayer.
* What Bible story or book do you struggle with? Pray for an open heart and mind in noticing God in it, for wisdom in seeking answers, and peace in coming to terms with a lack of knowledge.

*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**

* Visit [methodist.org.uk/Notice](http://methodist.org.uk/notice) for ideas on how to start noticing God, or [methodist.org.uk/NoticingGod](http://methodist.org.uk/noticinggod) for ideas on how to go deeper.
* Journal for just one minute at the end of each day – where have you noticed God in the Bible or the world today? You might like to share your thoughts with others in your church or small group, either in your regular meetings or by text or in a WhatsApp group.
* Attend events from organisations such as Christians in Science, Christians in Politics, Christians in the Arts and many others to seek God in the world and learn from others.
* Explore how noticing God in the world relates to Methodist commitments for [the flourishing of creation](https://methodist.org.uk/flourish) and [challenging injustice](https://methodist.org.uk/challenge).
* Consider joining or starting a book or film club (or sports, theatre, gaming, etc) with the intention of noticing God (or spiritual themes) in so-called ‘secular’ arts. Subscribe to [The Friday Fix](https://thefridayfix.home.blog/) to explore God in music.