

Talking of God

**A faith sharing
resource for
local churches**

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Introduction

Now is the time to talk of God

We live in a world that is both exciting and challenging. A world in which local Methodism encourages us to remain proactive within our village, town and city. A world that is shattered through natural disaster and military attack. But a world where people's compassion and care for one another remains unquenched.

Our calling as Christian disciples is to be able to talk about our faith in ways which build up our own confidence and which also encourage others on their own discovery and kindling of faith-talk.

Talking of God is a Methodist course for Methodist people. It is a unique contribution to the resources available to churches and church leaders.

Background

In 2005, the Conference report *Time to Talk of God* was written and produced by the Methodist Church. It was very well received, and stimulated plenty of conversations within congregations.

In 2008, a working party convened to discuss the possibility of producing a faith-sharing resource for use within a local context, to help Christians become more confident in talking about their faith and discipleship.

In 2010, the Methodist Church began a five-year focus on whole-life discipleship. Part of this is to equip Methodist people in Britain to be life-long, whole-life, world-changing disciples who are confident and capable of joining others on their journey of discipleship.

"The Methodist Church will give particular attention to ... developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved."

*Priorities for the Methodist Church,
Methodist Conference 2004*

"Methodist Christian discipleship is rooted and focused on Jesus Christ, resourced by the Spirit of God, is both life-long and whole-life, communal rather than solitary, committed to transforming and serving 'the world', locally, nationally and globally and so is lived out on a 'big map', all offered as worship to God as loving obedience."

Martyn Atkins, Discipleship... and the people called Methodists, p. 1

Introduction

Purpose

Talking of God aims to:

- enable local churches to gain confidence in speaking about their faith in Jesus
- deepen the relationships between individuals within a church context
- encourage the church to recognise the opportunities already offered to them to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

“Now we are talking!” card

Your group leader will give each group member this card. It can be waved at any time through the course for a five minute interlude/discussion.

When it is waved, all conversation and/or input stops so that the whole group can answer the question: *Where can I put this into practice this week?*

It is a chance for each group member to draw on their own experience (eg their life story, what works for them) and then to extend that (ie moving beyond where they are). So it grounds the learning and the conversation in everyday experience.

Some ground rules

A group feels much safer to explore issues at a deeper level with each other if some ground rules have been agreed before the session starts. Here are some common ones, but feel free to add any further suggestions that are important for your group.

- The group will start and finish on time.
- Everyone is committed to attending each session unless they are ill or are genuinely prevented from attending.
- We will listen to each other, and respect each other when one is speaking.
- We will not talk over each other.
- We will allow space for sharing personal experience and testimony.
- We will watch out for each other and invite others to speak rather than to dominate the conversation.
- A judgemental or hostile tone is not acceptable.
- Disagreement and searching questions are acceptable, but these should be expressed with respect.
- Personal information shared within the group is confidential to that group and should not be passed on.

Members of the Working Party

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Preamble: Why the language of conversation?

Conversations are about:

- speaking
- listening
- mutuality
- respect
- relationship.

Conversations are important ways to communicate both meaning and action. They help us understand one another's intentions. This is why there is an action part to each session, and a whole session on living out life as a follower of Jesus.

In 1516, Erasmus produced his own translation of the New Testament into Latin, in which he translated "logos" from the prologue of John's Gospel not as verbum ("Word") but as sermo ("conversation"). Jesus is not just God's word but represents the whole of God's communication.

"It all started with a conversation at the heart of the Godhead and God was that conversation. God initiated that conversation within the Godhead and that conversation was the reason all things came into being and without it there would have been nothing.

In this conversation is life itself, the light of humanity, shining in a darkness which neither understood nor quenched its creativity.

There was a man sent by God, John he was called, who came to talk about the light so that all could see, so that all could believe through what they saw. John wasn't what it was all about – no the true light which lit up everyone was on its way into the world. Indeed the conversation was here in the world but the world didn't pick it up. It came to those who knew the language but they acted as if they didn't hear. But those who did hear (who responded to the conversation itself), he gave them the power to become God's children, in a new way, a special way, in God's way.

The conversation became enfleshed and pitched its tent among us. We've seen for ourselves how deep that conversation is, as deep as God himself the only one, full of grace and truth."

(based on John 1:1-14, inspired by Clive Scott)

(You can read Clive Scott's John 1:1-14 revisited in Time to Talk of God, p. 81)

God's conversation

- How do we respond to this paraphrase?
- How does this passage develop the idea of a conversation?

God's conversation amongst us in Jesus

- How does this affect our own conversations?
- How might God's conversation model conversation for us?

Our conversation

- What makes a good conversation? What are the values of conversation that we want to see through this course?

Session 1: Starting the Conversation



Aim of session

- to recognise our role and responsibility in sharing our faith today, and to gain confidence in our personal story

Time to talk

People need to meet a different Christian people in a variety of situations, before they are able to make a personal commitment to Christ. This involves a number of people with a wide range of gifts to be part of the process.

Here are some possible roles.

- Inviter** – overcoming people's reservations about joining in, and making people feel at ease
- Befriender** – good at making initial contacts and getting on well with people
- Friend** – in for the long haul, always there for people
- Shoulder to cry on** – someone who is available and easy to talk to, whatever the situation
- Deal-clincher** – evangelist who leads people to a moment of commitment
- Intercessor** – supports others in prayer
- Counsellor** – someone giving wise counsel
- Servant** – helps in practical ways
- Chatterbox** – who is always talking
- Challenger** – who upsets the boat



For Conversation

Conversations with the Jesus of the Gospels

The Gospels are full of conversations – conversations that bring transformation and illumination. Through the Gospel accounts, the teaching that disciples throughout the centuries have received comes not only in the form of sermons or commandments, but also through stories and parables and conversations. There is relationship. There is humour, anger; irony and passion. Individuals have space to respond and to direct the next move and sentence. There is room for learning and transformation. We do not always catch a glimpse of what happened next, but we too are left to go and talk about Jesus ourselves and to work out what it all means for us, today.

Will you witness, by word and deed, to the good news of God in Christ, and so bring glory to God?

With God's help I will.

(Promise made by the newly-confirmed)

For Conversation

- Which role best suits you?
- What roles, if any, do you think are missing?

(Why not ask someone who knows you well to tell you which they think you might be – tell the group next week!)

Session 1: Starting the Conversation

Luke 8:1-15 (The Parable of the Sower)

Soon afterwards [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold." As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that

'looking they may not perceive,
and listening they may not understand.'

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance."
(NRSV)



For Conversation

For Conversation

- What are the key features of the Parable of the Sower?
- How might these features help us when we are thinking and talking about our faith with other people?

Session 1: Starting the Conversation



Acting the story

1. Either

- a. Using a line to represent your life so far, mark on it the points that are crucial in your development as a disciple of Jesus. (You may also want to add significant world events too that have had an impact on the people around you.) (See page 9)

or

- b. Draw a large tree shape, with trunk, roots and branches. If the trunk represents your life as a disciple, think about what is important. What are the things that root you in your discipleship? Write or draw these on the roots. On the branches, write down the people and things which are important in your life. From the branches, write down what you hope are some of the 'fruits' of your life. (See page 10)

For Conversation

- Share with another group member (ie someone you did not arrive with) what you have drawn and what you discovered, thought and felt through this.
- How did it feel to share your story with someone that you may not know very well?
- What was it like to hear someone else's story?

For Conversation

Share your story with a partner.

- Are there things you don't understand?
- Is there any jargon?
- What is exciting about the story?
- What questions do you want to ask?



For Conversation

2. Either

- a. Write your story in 50 words.

Try to remember:

- Why did you become a Christian?
- What happened?
- What difference has Jesus made in your life?
- Try to tell it so that it provokes more questions from the reader.

or

- b. What difference does Jesus make in your life?
(Try and use 140 characters or less – the length of a tweet)



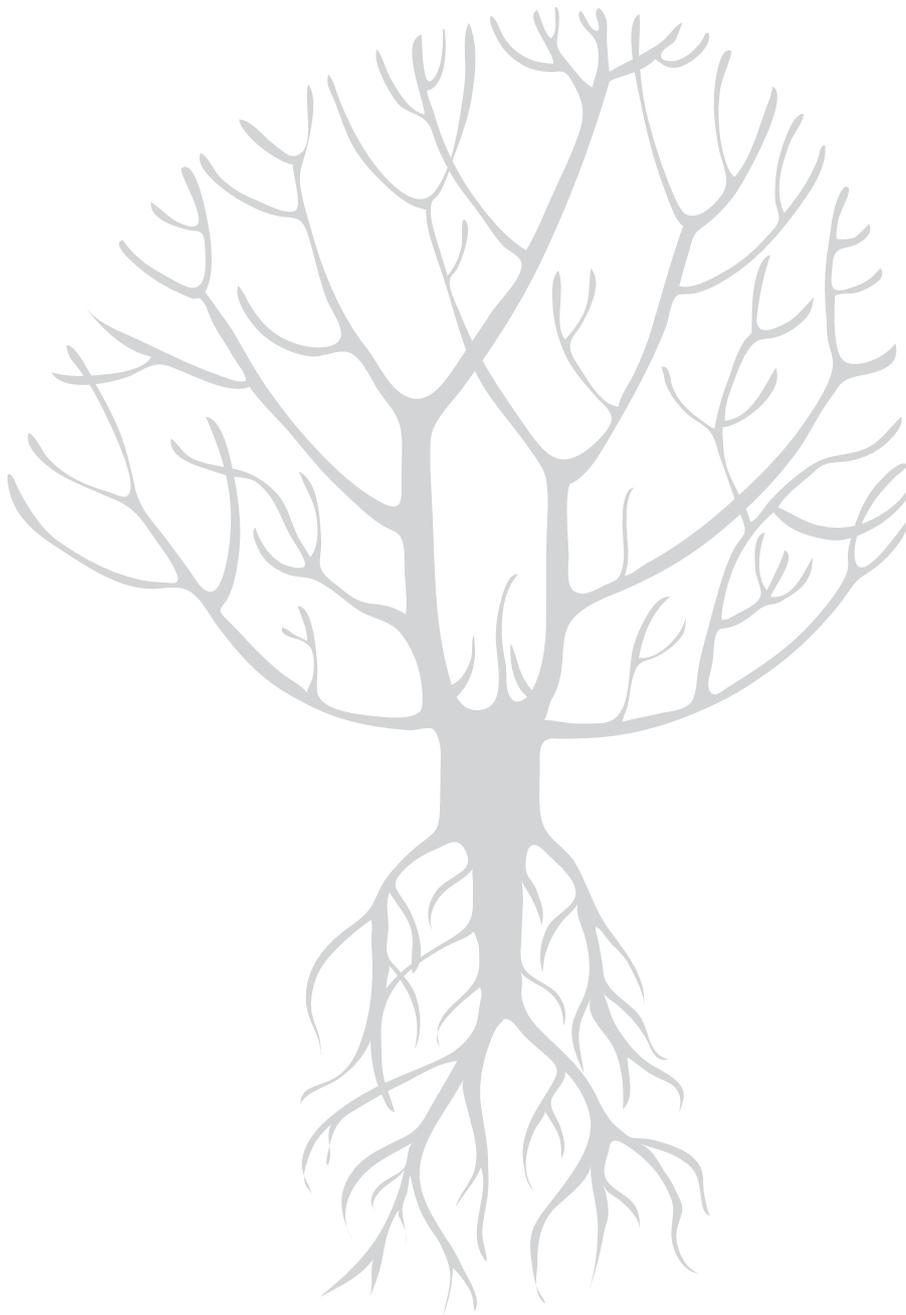
For Conversation

Session 1: Starting the Conversation

Using this line to represent your life so far, mark on it the points that are crucial in your development as a disciple of Jesus. (You may also want to add significant world events too that have had an impact on the people around you.)

Session 1: Starting the Conversation

Draw a large tree shape, with trunk, roots and branches. If the trunk represents your life as a disciple, think about what is important. What are the things that root you in your discipleship? Write or draw these on the roots. On the branches, write down the people and things which are important in your life. From the branches, write down what you hope are some of the 'fruits' of your life.



Session 1: Starting the Conversation

Conclusion

Each of us has a story to share, and gifts and graces that enable us to do just this!

Jesus has called each one of us to follow him, and gives us his Holy Spirit to encourage and equip us for the journey of discipleship before us.



Closing prayer (See page 33)

Session 2: Conversation Stoppers



Aim of session

- to gain confidence amidst some concerns, prejudices and difficulties with sharing faith

What can you say?

Always be ready to make your defence to everyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

1 Peter 3:15-16 (NRSV)

January 15, 1762

“Went to London on Friday to the meeting. Mr. M—d desired any to speak who had not before declared the goodness of God. I was convinced I ought to speak but feared I should bring a reproach upon the cause of my foolishness and was tempted to think... that I knew not how to order my speech aright. But the Lord said ‘take no thought how or what you shall speak for in that hour it shall be given you ...’”

Journal of Jane Cooper (1738-62), an early Methodist laywoman



For Conversation

Telling people outside of church the good news of the gospel can be a real pressure for some Christians.



For Conversation

Conversations with the Jesus of the Gospels

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For Conversation

- Talking in pairs, how do you respond to this scripture passage?
- What challenges you?
- What encourages you?

For Conversation

- Talking in pairs, where are your supportive environments? What makes them supportive?
- What are the challenging places? Why do you find them so challenging?

Session 2: Conversation Stoppers

John 4:1-30 (Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman)

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" – although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized – he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink". (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. (NRSV)

For Conversation

- What is shocking about this conversation? In context, why should it not have taken place?
- What conversation stoppers are present in this conversation?
- What can you learn from Jesus' conversation here?
- What can you learn from the Samaritan woman's reaction to Jesus?



For Conversation

Session 2: Conversation Stoppers



Acting the story

Look at the following statements:

- You cannot be a follower of Jesus without having a role in church leadership.
- The business of running a church keeps us too busy to have other conversations.
- Evangelism is for those who are paid to do it.
- I am not good enough.
- I don't fit into this community.
- Christians need to be nice.
- The Church fails to talk about tough issues.
- The church should not be the place where faith is discussed.
- Faith should only be discussed in private.
- Conversation means that we cannot disagree.
- Evangelism is only for those interested in Christian spirituality.
- I don't have the right answers.
- Friendship is too valuable to lose by sharing my faith.
- Discipleship is about doubt, so why should anyone else be interested.
- Religious tolerance means that I cannot share my faith in public.
- I don't know.
- ? (to include any other statements that might be raised)



For Conversation

Conclusion

Talking about our faith is not:

- just for the famous evangelists
- about winning an argument
- one-size fits all
- just about an event or crisis moment.

Talking about our relationship with God is:

- infectious
- compassionate.

It is also about God's action within the world. We are in partnership with God.



Closing prayer (See page 33)

For Conversation

- In turn each group member chooses a card and poses the statement to the rest of the group.
- Together talk about what the statement might mean, and whether the group agrees or disagrees with it.

Session 3: Conversations in Context



Aim of session

- to examine life in twenty-first century British culture, which frames our conversations

Explaining our faith

In his book *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*, Steve Croft quotes research that 76% of people have had a life-changing spiritual experience. Our task, then, is to explain people's experiences with God or with the 'supernatural'. We need to value other's experiences, identifying God at work there and so discovering God together.

You may be one of the 76% of people who have had a life changing spiritual experience. In fact, because you are taking this short course, you will probably have had an experience of God.



For Conversation

Social holiness

The requirement of Methodists is to discern our calling in community together, and to make places and spaces available in our diaries and in our local context to enable others to be stretched to grow in God's grace too.



For Conversation

Where do we live?

Over recent years, a significant amount of research has been produced that suggests that people in Britain now broadly live their lives in three 'places'.

See diagram on page 16

*To serve the present age,
my calling to fulfil;-
O may it all my powers engage
to do my Master's will!*

*Charles Wesley,
Hymns & Psalms 785, verse 2*

For Conversation

- Think of a time when God has been active in your life such as
 - a blessing from God
 - an assurance from God
 - taking a stand at work or in a relationship
 - when God has given you clear direction about an issue
 - healing
 - comfort in tragedy or crisis
 - something totally different.
- Share this experience in two's or three's. Help each other to see how this conversation may fit into an everyday situation.

For Conversation

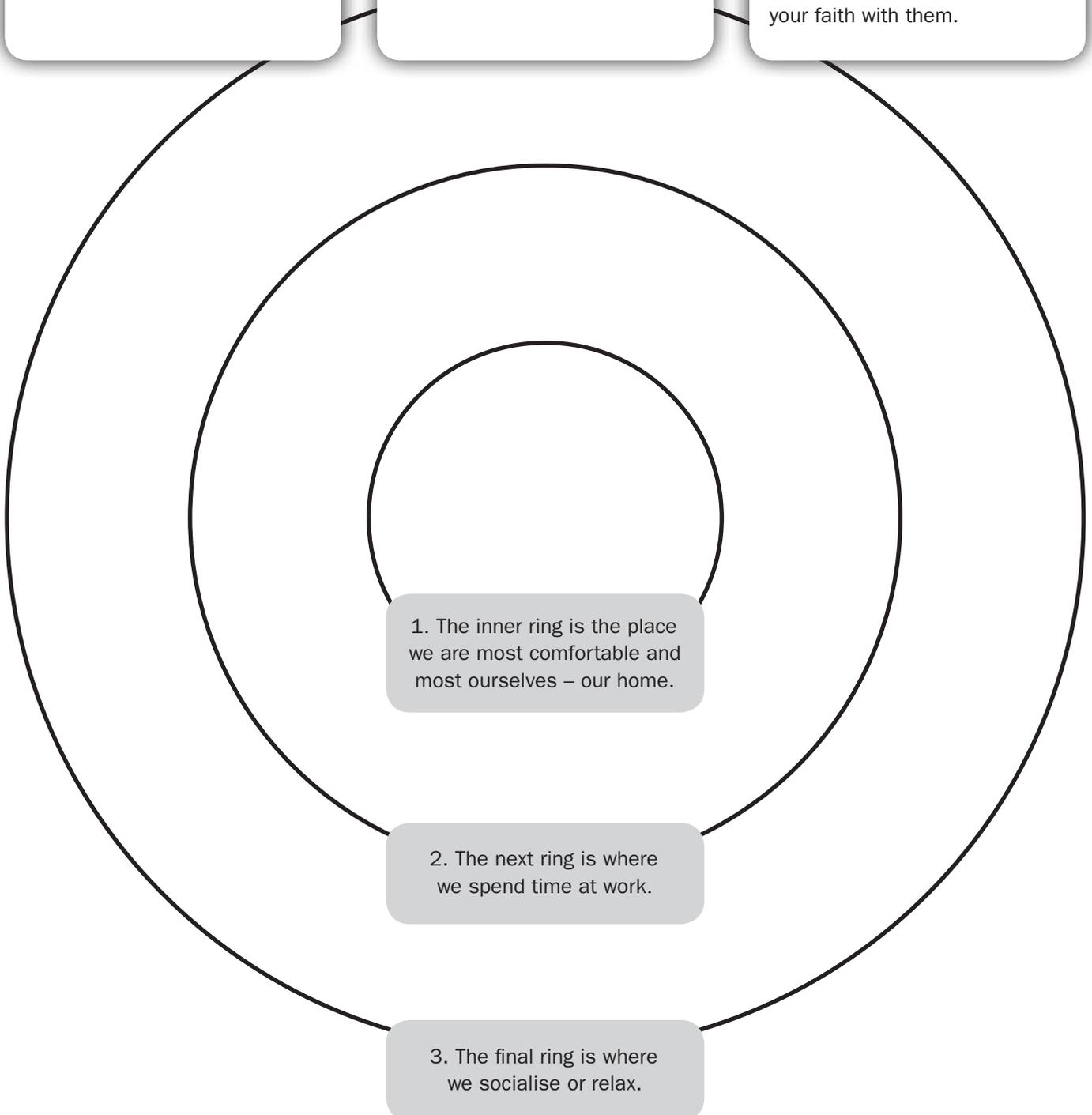
- When/where have you been stretched to grow in God's grace towards Christ?

Session 3: Conversations in Context

Think about the diagram in front of you. Where are your first, second and third places? Write them down.

Write down the names of the people with whom you are in conversation with in each ring of the diagram.

Take the diagram home and use it to help you pray for those who you are talking to. Ask God for more opportunities to share your faith with them.



Session 3: Conversations in Context



For Conversation

Conversations with the Jesus of the Gospels

The Gospels are full of conversations – conversations that bring transformation and illumination. Through the Gospel accounts, the teaching that disciples throughout the centuries have received comes not only in the form of sermons or commandments, but also through stories and parables and conversations. There is relationship. There is humour, anger; irony and passion. Individuals have space to respond and to direct the next move and sentence. There is room for learning and transformation. We do not always catch a glimpse of what happened next, but we too are left to go and talk about Jesus ourselves and to work out what it all means for us, today.

Luke 14:1-14 (Jesus at the Pharisees' house)

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place', and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (NRSV)

For Conversation

"We need to provide safe and loving places in which to share honestly the deepest concerns and questions of our lives."

Time to Talk of God, p. 23

- Do you agree?
- What might these places look like in your local community?

For Conversation

- How do you think the Pharisees might have responded to this situation?
- How do you respond to Jesus' teaching here?



For Conversation

Session 3: Conversations in Context

The missional community *Small Boat, Big Sea*, has a rule of life for all its members. Each week they are to:

- bless three people every week – one from church, one friend or acquaintance and one from either - tell them why they are special/important to you
- eat with three people a week
- listen to God (once a week) particularly about when to engage with culture and when to resist it
- learn Jesus (once a week), reading the Bible, reading what others say about Jesus and letting him be the template of who you want to be.
- journal all the ways that you have been sent on mission
- be accountable.



For Conversation



Acting the story

This section offers reflections on a number of contemporary contextual 'issues'. As a group, decide on one issue, either that is provided here or write your own! If you do the latter, please send it to the Evangelism, Spirituality and Discipleship office at Methodist Church House (email: esdadmin@methodistchurch.org.uk) and we will add your resources to this one. For each section, suggestions are made as to where further information can be found. This section may require more preparation than other sections in this course.

We are all part of the contemporary culture as well as being rooted in the Christian traditions of Britain and the world. We have to wrestle with integrity, honesty and humility with how and when we are to engage with contemporary culture, when we are called to be counter-cultural and when we may need to be a little more subversive.

Sometimes discerning these three distinctions is not easy! In part this is because our context can be so comfortable and familiar that we are unable to discern difficulties. It may also be because we become so confined to our Christian sub-culture that we have forgotten how to engage and notice what is going on in our contemporary culture.

We need to have authentic conversations: conversations with Christians; conversations with colleagues; conversations on the bus, in the hairdresser, at the shop counter.

For Conversation

- What do you like/dislike about this rule of life?
- What might be some principles of Methodist discipleship found in this rule?
- What other rules of life do you know about?

Try following this rule for the next week, remembering Jesus' teaching in this passage in Luke 14. Find out how each other got on at your next meeting!

Session 3: Conversations in Context

Together we can discern ways to be faithfully Christian and authentically culturally engaged participants in the twenty-first century.



For Conversation

Some conversations that we may find ourselves part of include:

Living globally

(See also *Time to Talk of God*, pp. 32-33 and the Methodist Church's 2009 report *Hope in God's Future*)

We are now intimately connected to the world in ways that we could only ever imagine a few years ago. We can talk with people around the world and we can instantly react to disaster and need. Yet at the same time, we are increasingly more isolated and lonely; unable to name the people who live near us in our street.

We live, work and socialise in very separate environments and communities that have little or no overlap. Life can be segregated.

At the same time, we are sold a dramatic life through soap operas where everyone knows everyone else. For most of us, this is now a fairy tale or distant memory.



For Conversation

"Christian people do not stand outside society, seeking to reform it; their characters are formed by the social structures they inhabit there must be engagement with the thought forms of contemporary society."

(Margaret Jones, "Growing in grace and holiness" in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, p. 156 (quoted in *Time to Talk of God*, p. 31))

For Conversation

- Do you agree/disagree with what Margaret Jones has written? Why

For Conversation

- How do we live in a global economy whilst at the same time becoming increasingly personally isolated?
- There are a number of other questions that you might like to think about in response.
 - Who is my neighbour in this context? Why does this matter?
 - Who is God calling me to serve?
 - What influence do I have and how do I use it?
 - What influence do we have and how do we use it?
 - Why is this issue important when it comes to a conversation about our faith?
 - What conversations do I want to continue to have in light of thinking about our contemporary context?

Session 3: Conversations in Context

Work/life balance

(See also *Time to Talk of God*, pp. 34-35)

Life now moves at an increasingly fast pace. Working hours extend far beyond the 9-5 of contracts. Weekends are no longer the protectorate of relaxation and recreation – but instead full of busy schedules and meetings.

It has been argued that overwork and consumerism go hand in hand. At the same time, we are told to pamper ourselves in order to compensate for tiredness and stress.

Within Christian circles, there is an increased awareness of the need for rhythms and routines and rules in life. There is an increased desire for people to attend retreats and to invest in silence and meditation. When Christian spirituality appears not to offer this, people search for space and meditation in other spiritual explorations.



For Conversation

For Conversation

- Do you have a healthy work/life balance? If you were not in public would your answer be the same?
- What do you think are the results of an unhealthy work/life balance?
- What might be a Christian response? How might you support your leaders to do this too?
- There are a number of other questions that you might like to think about in response.
 - Who is my neighbour in this context? Why does this matter?
 - Who is God calling me to serve?
 - What influence do I have and how do I use it?
 - What influence do we have and how do we use it?
 - Why is this issue important when it comes to a conversation about our faith?
 - What conversations do I want to continue to have in light of thinking about our contemporary context?

Session 3: Conversations in Context

Pick-and-mix spirituality

(See also *Time to Talk of God*, pp. 36-37, *Essence* and Steve Hollinghurst, *Mission Shaped Evangelism*)

There are many conversations in contemporary society, which demonstrate an interest in all things spiritual. This is shown not least in the thriving market in publications, alternative therapies and retreats that address spirituality.

In turn, we live in a world where fundamental religion is seen to be a discipline to be revered or to be frightened of. The impact of terrorism also needs to be considered when we are looking at the wider spiritual and religious conversation that is happening within our society.

On the whole, the doctrines, disciplines and membership to any group are not, for the most part, seen to be attractive.

Even as Christians we are confronted with the communication of certainty that other faith groups communicate. Some Christian and other faith groups can appear to be disciplined, have distinct boundaries and are certain of their faith and articulate in communicating their doctrine.



For Conversation

For Conversation

- What traditions can we learn from as Christians? Are there traditions that we cannot/should not learn from? Why?
- How might we be able to connect our own story into a conversation about spirituality?
- There are a number of other questions that you might like to think about in response.
 - Who is my neighbour in this context? Why does this matter?
 - Who is God calling me to serve?
 - What influence do I have and how do I use it?
 - What influence do we have and how do we use it?
 - Why is this issue important when it comes to a conversation about our faith?
 - What conversations do I want to continue to have in light of thinking about our contemporary context?

Session 3: Conversations in Context

Moral codes and ethics

(See also *Time to Talk of God*, pp. 38)

Over the years, the Church has had to shift its position on certain moral codes. Slavery, the employment of minors, the place of women, sexual politics – all of these are moral codes that have been re-coded in a contextual way.



For Conversation

For Conversation

- Is morality a good place to start a conversation about faith/spirituality? Why?
- What are the important things for your own moral code? How do you communicate these?
- There are a number of other questions that you might like to think about in response.
 - Who is my neighbour in this context? Why does this matter?
 - Who is God calling me to serve?
 - What influence do I have and how do I use it?
 - What influence do we have and how do we use it?
 - Why is this issue important when it comes to a conversation about our faith?
 - What conversations do I want to continue to have in light of thinking about our contemporary context?

Session 3: Conversations in Context

Social Media and the rise in technology

(See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQ0wFqNfu7A)

According to the YouTube clip, Facebook, if it were a country, would be the fourth largest in the world.

The world of social media connects people across the world in ways that are technologically advanced and yet entirely user friendly. The developments are happening so fast that it can feel like an entirely different world if one is not actively using and engaging with the technology before us.

Those who are unable/do not engage in social media are left to feel isolated and left out of an international movement.

The internet is not always a safe place to be. It is a place to hide and to groom, to purchase and to promote – in ways that would be unethical or illegal in an offline world.



For Conversation

Conclusion

We live in a world with so many messages being communicated in so many different ways. This session has looked at some of these, and encouraged us to investigate how we may be a conversation partner to the cultural messages around and about us.



Closing prayer (See page 33)

For Conversation

- To what extent do you engage in social media? Why?
- What might it look like to be authentically Christian online as well as offline?
- There are a number of other questions that you might like to think about in response.
 - Who is my neighbour in this context? Why does this matter?
 - Who is God calling me to serve?
 - What influence do I have and how do I use it?
 - What influence do we have and how do we use it?
 - Why is this issue important when it comes to a conversation about our faith?
 - What conversations do I want to continue to have in light of thinking about our contemporary context?

Session 4: Living the Conversation



Aim of session

- to see the power of an authentic life lived in an honest engagement with others, the world and the stories that are told



For Conversation

The journey to faith



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“This is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others; that every holy temper, and word, and work of yours, may have an influence on them also.”

Sermon 21 - Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (Discourse 4) John Wesley (Sermons on Several Occasions)

For Conversation

“[We need to] provide safe and loving spaces in which to share honestly the deepest concerns and questions of our lives, to become vulnerable to one another, supportive of one another and challenging of one another.”

(from an account of a Methodist Council conversation, included in the report Priorities for the Methodist Church (Conference 2004 Agenda, p. 127) quoted in Time to Talk of God, p. 25)

- Where are your places of comfort, safety and love?
- Who are the people you talk with there?

Session 4: Living the Conversation

When we think about evangelism, we can often assume that evangelism has been executed as a sales deal to be closed, or a cold call.

Richardson in *Reimagining Evangelism* (Bletchley, Scripture Union, 2007) suggests that a more loving and Christlike way to share our faith is to see ourselves as travel guides, escorting others on a journey that we ourselves have embarked on. We must remember though, that each of us has a different journey and so escorting each person we will also encounter new places.

Conversations with the Jesus of the Gospels

The Gospels are full of conversations – conversations that bring transformation and illumination. Through the Gospel accounts, the teaching that disciples throughout the centuries have received comes not only in the form of sermons or commandments, but also through stories and parables and conversations. There is relationship. There is humour, anger; irony and passion. Individuals have space to respond and to direct the next move and sentence. There is room for learning and transformation. We do not always catch a glimpse of what happened next, but we too are left to go and talk about Jesus ourselves and to work out what it all means for us, today.

“Do not try to call [people] back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as it may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.”

Vincent Donovan,
Christianity Rediscovered
(Norwich, SCM-Canterbury Press, 2001)

Luke 24:13-35 (the road to Emmaus)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the

Continued on next page

Session 4: Living the Conversation

Continued from previous page

prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. (NRSV)



For Conversation

Acting the story



For Conversation

For Conversation

- This is a really familiar story – what sticks out for you on reading this?
- What conversations are there in the story?
- Who do you identify with in the story?
- Who are the people who accompany you on your journey?

For Conversation

- How does Jesus engage with people through the Gospels?
- How might we use the same/different methods today?

Use the table on page 27 to write down your ideas.

Session 4: Living the Conversation



For Conversation

Conclusion

We are called to follow the dance of the Holy Spirit as God's mission is unfolding all across the world. We are called to follow Jesus, as his good news brings hope and transformation.

"When you run out of words to say, you show me Jesus through the words on your face."
(African proverb)

Conversations that we share and people whose lives interweave with ours are not just verbal conversations – they are the conversations of actions, of silence, of prayer and of justice. They are the conversations of journey and the investment of relationship.



Closing prayer *(See page 33)*

For Conversation

- How do these methods compare and contrast with the 'roles' of evangelism in the 'Starting the conversation' section (see page 6)?
- How can/do you move from action to conversation and from conversation to action?
- Do you think there are times when this is more/less important? When?

Concluding Worship and Reflection

A Love Feast

A good way to end a course on faith-sharing is to do something! And a good way to end a course on faith sharing for Methodists is to do some in the context of a love feast, John Wesley's revival of the early Christian 'Agape' and central to the nineteenth-century Primitive Methodist revival.

In a circle, 'plain cake and water' (or fruit juice if preferred!) is passed around:

So, gather around.

Share cake and juice.

Perhaps sing one of the favourite hymns from the 'Starting the Conversation' setting the scene exercise.



For Conversation

Pray together, thanking God for all the stories that have been shared and for the opportunity to learn together.

"The love-feast is both begun and ended by singing and a prayer ... The time is chiefly taken up in relating Christian experience. Any person may speak who chooses. They are generally very agreeable, edifying and refreshing seasons. They tend to promote piety, mutual affection and zeal."

A true and complete portraiture of Methodism or The History of the Wesleyan Methodists, *Jonathan Crowther* (pub. 1813), p. 239

For Conversation

Tell each other your story of faith. Use these prompts if they are helpful:

- What have you found the most important about the course?
- What have you discovered about yourself?
- Where has God been in your life?
- Where is God for you today?
- What have you discovered about your faith through this course?

Continuing the Conversation: Further resources

One of the aims of *Talking of God* is to give people within the Methodist Church some tools to become more confident in speaking of their faith in the contexts and relationships they are already in.

There are plenty of ways to follow up this short course in terms of further evangelism tools and programmes. Here are just a few ideas and pointers in the right direction.

For further information you can talk to your district evangelism enabler, director of mission, district mission development officer or district mission enabler.

Alternatively you can contact the Evangelism, Spirituality and Discipleship Office at Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR (email: esdadmin@methodistchurch.org.uk)

MSI/MSM course

(www.freshexpressions.org.uk/missionshapedintro or www.missionshapedministry.org)

Mission Shaped Introduction (MSI) and Mission Shaped Ministry (MSM) are two courses designed to help individuals and churches discover ways of engaging in mission in local contexts.

For more information speak to your district evangelism enabler.

LICC

LICC (the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity) equips Christians and churches for whole-life discipleship in the world. It offers a biblical framework, practical resources and models to engage biblically, relevantly and vigorously with issues in modern life. Its website www.licc.org.uk gives details of its work with the Bible, today's culture, the workplace and youth as well as books, DVDs and training material.

More than Gold (www.morethangold.org.uk)

More than Gold exists to enable British churches to engage with the 2012 Olympic Games. All too often churches can be seen negatively, as out of touch and only interested in themselves. But by playing their part in the programmes of outreach, hospitality and service every church can help tell a different story. More than Gold offers suggestions, advice and resources so that through the Olympic Games communities can discover more about God and faith.

Hope Together www.hopetogether.org.uk

HOPE's purpose is to support and facilitate more mission, mission together and mission through word and action - sharing the love of Jesus with others. It aims to see long lasting spiritual change in the lives of individuals and whole communities transformed.

Hope Together was born out of Hope 2008, when thousands of young people volunteered their time to spread the good news in word and through action, in unity with other Christians. During that time many people came to faith, local people were impacted and significant crime was reduced.

Share Jesus International

(www.sharejesusinternational.com)

SJI is passionate about communicating the good news about Jesus in our ever-changing times. It is committed to helping people to find their place in God's plans; assisting local churches as they communicate the gospel relevantly and powerfully; proclaiming a gospel that challenges injustice and encourages the church to serve the poor and the marginalised. Their website gives details of their current faith-sharing projects and resources.

Inspire Network (www.inspire-network.org.uk)

Inspire is developing a network of small groups, called fellowship bands, committed to following a 'way of life' that is rooted in accountable discipleship, spiritual growth and evangelistic mission.

Continuing the Conversation: Further resources

Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship... and the People called Methodists*

(Peterborough, Methodist Publishing, 2010)

Martyn Atkins (general secretary of the Methodist Church and former president of Conference) writes about Christian discipleship from a Methodist perspective. Suitable for group study, the booklet has multiple stopping points for reflection and discussion. The booklet is also available as an e-book and downloadable pdf from www.deepeningdiscipleship.org.uk.

Essence (Kingsway/CPAS, 2002)

Essence is a six-part course providing an experiential introduction to the Christian faith in a culturally relevant way. The overriding objective is to help people who may view themselves as 'spiritual' to journey towards the Christian faith. The course seeks to start where people are, so the concepts explored are all recognisable to those familiar with New Age spirituality. Essence seeks to help participants look at these concepts and issues from a Christian perspective. Although out-of-print it can be downloaded free from www.sharejesusinternational.com/resources/essence.

Steve Croft, *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*

(London, Church House Publishing, 2005)

This book takes a detailed look at the spirituality of people beyond the fringe of the Church and offers insightful responses to how the Church might address the issue of evangelism in the twenty-first century.

Hope in God's Future

(Peterborough, Methodist Publishing, 2009)

An attractively-presented study guide to help individuals and local groups understand the position of the Methodist Church on climate change, become aware of vital connections between climate change and the Christian faith, transform lifestyles through studying, praying and acting on the issues and inspire others in the community to live in harmony with the whole of Creation. It also includes questions to get you thinking, ideas for creative activities, inspirational prayers and worship, and suggestions for group sessions.

John Pritchard, *How to Explain your Faith*

(London, SPCK, 2006)

This user-friendly book will help the reader talk more confidently about their faith and belief. Each chapter begins with a 'What they say' section. Pritchard then identifies the key issue, before suggesting (in reassuring detail) ways to respond. All through the book there are stories, as well as inspiring, poignant and witty quotes to work into conversations whenever the opportunity may arise!

David Flavell, *A Love Feast*

(Stowmarket, Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2007)

Written by a Methodist minister, this book leads the reader through the Love Feast, from its origins to its reintroduction in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as how to re-enact it effectively today. Included are many resource opportunities, much detail in the readings and prayers, an effective 'how to' prepare for the actual service and meal, music, books to read, songs to sing.

Steve Hollinghurst, *Mission Shaped Evangelism*

(Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2010)

This book emphasises that Christians must recognise that "lifestyle is far more important than dogma" in the 21st century. The early Christian Church spread the gospel across the known world by involving itself in other cultures, and Steve Hollinghurst argues that a similar approach is required today.

Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*

(Bletchley, Scripture Union, 2007)

This book is for individuals and groups and includes exercises and discussion pointers to help people invite their friends on a spiritual journey, where doubts and questions are taken seriously. It explores potential obstacles and opportunities for evangelism in everyday situations, using stories that capture the heart of every chapter.

Continuing the Conversation: Further resources

Mark Greene, *Supporting Christians at Work*

(London, Administry/LICC, 2001)

Available from www.licc.org.uk this small booklet helps ministers encourage and envision workers in their congregation. It offers a simple refocusing of Church mission strategy by making the case for workplace ministry, discussing the theological issues which have blocked workplace ministry, offering ideas on how ministers and their communities can practically support the workers.

Time to Talk of God

(Peterborough, Methodist Publishing House, 2005)

Subtitled 'Recovering Christian conversation as a way to nurturing discipleship', *Time of Talk of God* addresses one of Methodism's key priorities. Highly readable, this Conference report is presented in a lively way for use by small groups, with engaging images, telling quotes and questions to get people talking at depth about what matters most.

Praying Together



Prayer of review: the examen

This is a method of prayer associated with Ignatius Loyola. It is usually used at the end of a day, to look back at where God was active and in order to learn what God would have us see.

The group leader leads people through this slowly, leaving time between each section for people to engage with God.

- a. Sit comfortably and still yourself; relax, be aware of your breathing, your body and how you are feeling.
- b. Remember you are in the presence of God and ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes as you look back at this session and the course.
- c. What are you most grateful for about the course? In what ways have you experienced God's love?
- d. What are you least grateful for about the course? Where was it hard to love or be loved?
- e. Talk to God about your insights. Ask God for what you need for the days ahead.
- f. Listen to what God might have to say to you.
- g. Reflect on something you will try to put into practice from what you have discovered from this session.
- h. When you are ready, open your eyes and join the rest of the group.



Prayerful conversations

The group splits in to prayer partners or prayer triplets.

This will be the person or people that you share your experiences between sessions with, and you will also pray together at the end of the session.

Include in your sharing something each of you will try to put into practice from what you have discovered from this session.

Agree together that the conversation shared in this conversation will be kept confidential.

Pray for each other through the week too, as you try to put what you have discovered into practice as you talk of God in your everyday lives.

Acknowledgements

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