

REFLECT

AND

RESPOND

LEADERS' GUIDE



Introduction and an Overview of *Reflect and Respond*

Whether or not you are a survivor of abuse, exploring the material in the *Reflect and Respond* study guide with your Methodist Church house group or Bible study group will take courage. *Reflect and Respond* considers the calling of the Methodist Church: to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship through worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism, from the perspective of survivors of different forms of abuse. These guidance notes aim to offer you as house/Bible group leaders a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues raised by *Reflect and Respond* and to give you the confidence to facilitate the course effectively.

To the uninitiated, trying to understand the effects that abuse can have on a person may feel frightening or confusing. Many still believe "It doesn't happen here" and "Only nice people go to this church". In the year ending March 2019, the Crime Survey for England and Wales estimated that over 20% of the adult population aged 18 to 74 years experienced abuse before the age of 16. So statistically, if you have more than five people in your congregation, group or gathering, then there is a high probability that you know someone who was abused as a child. This may be from neglect, or from sexual, physical, emotional or any other form of abuse. Many other people will have experienced a form of abuse during their adult life. You will probably have no idea who they are because they have learnt to 'keep the secret'. We know the consequences of sharing. There is also a good chance you have one or more perpetrators of abuse in your midst. They are also very good at not letting others know.

Sadly, in the past the Church has been guilty of burying its head in the sand and blaming victims of abuse by using statements such as "Christianity is about forgiveness" and "If you really believed, you would turn the other cheek". Fortunately, since the Past Cases Review, the Methodist Church has

started to listen to those people who have experienced abuse and who really understand. The Methodist Survivors' Advisory Group was formed as a result of the findings of the Past Cases Review. After many hours of hard work and sharing, the *Reflect and Respond* study guide has been produced by this group. Its purpose is to begin to illuminate and provide more understanding about this difficult area of life and to help churches to consider how they can live out their calling towards survivors of abuse.

We understand that a difficult task may lie ahead for those who undertake to lead the *Reflect and Respond* study in a church group, since part of the study's purpose is to challenge those who deny that abuse occurs in church settings, believing that "Christians don't do things like this". We only have to watch the news to know that this is just not true. The Church, other caring professions or even one's own family are just as likely to have abusers amongst them as any other area of life. Indeed most people who experience abuse know the perpetrator. So challenge is needed. For evidence of this we just need to turn to the gospel and see how many times Jesus challenged the people and even the leaders of those times. His challenging brought about change and entry into the kingdom of heaven for all who believed in Him.

Taking care

As a leader of this study, you need to be aware that this subject matter can trigger difficult and sometimes painful memories for anyone who has been the victim of any form of abuse. If you are worried about this, please do speak to your District Safeguarding Officer before proceeding.

At the start of each session, it is helpful to say to the group that the subject you are about to explore is sensitive and that no one is obliged to stay if they feel uncomfortable during the discussion or if it brings up difficult memories. Reassure members of the group that they do not have to explain why they need to leave, but that they are welcome to talk to you about anything after the

session has finished. Please also ensure that everyone in the group has an easy exit from the room or building if needed.

If you do find that a group participant speaks out about their experience of abuse, please do not feel that you have to ‘counsel’ the person or be an expert in trauma and abuse. They may just need someone to talk to who is compassionate. It is ok to say things like, “It’s terrible that you have had to suffer this awful experience; it wasn’t your fault” and offer to help them find support, in the same way that you would respond to anyone sharing a difficult experience. Ensure you have available copies of the Supporting Survivors of Abuse leaflet¹. If the person discloses that they are currently in an abusive relationship or situation, you have a responsibility to tell your District Safeguarding Officer. There is information about organisations who can help them at www.methodist.org.uk/safeguarding/support-for-survivors/other-organisations/

Most importantly, believe what you are being told and value the person who is telling you. It might be the first time they have ever mentioned it to anyone and your response can make a difference between them seeking help or remaining silent.

Do not share with the rest of the group what you have been told. Only share with the people who need to know, to enable the correct support to be given and – unless a child or vulnerable adult is at risk – always with the person’s permission.

At the first session put in place ‘Rules for the group’. It is a good idea to let the group think about these and make suggestions.

Ensure that they include:

1 The Methodist Church Safeguarding webpage www.methodist.org.uk/safeguarding/support-for-survivors/survivor-resources/

- 1. Look after yourself.**
- 2. You don't have to share anything you don't wish to.**
- 3. You should always gain consent to share a disclosure unless a child or vulnerable person is at risk.**
- 4. Only one person should speak at a time.**
- 5. Listen well and be sensitive to others in the group.**
- 6. Please respect any differences arising from others' views, social background, sexuality, ethnicity or faith position.**
- 7. Everyone's point of view is valid, even if others don't agree.**
- 8. If someone does leave the group at any point, no one will ask why, make them feel uncomfortable, or say anything to anyone else.**

What is Abuse?

Abuse and neglect happen throughout all of society regardless of social status, race and culture. They can take place in a wide range of situations and locations, including the family. Childhood abuse is the root cause of much criminal behaviour. Abuse can be divided into categories of physical, emotional/psychological and sexual. Physical abuse includes non-accidental injuries intended to cause pain or intimidation, such as hitting, pushing, kicking, biting, burning, rough handling, inappropriate use of restraint, isolation or confinement, misuse of medication, forcible feeding or withholding food. Emotional abuse is an inherent part of all kinds of maltreatment and includes: humiliation, constant criticism, being threatened or shouted at, a lack of emotional responsiveness and availability, being denied essential stimulation, kindness, support or encouragement, being rejected, devalued or terrorised by someone. Sexual abuse is where someone is psychologically coerced or physically forced into sexual contact such as being made to watch sexual acts, posing for pornographic images, grooming with the intent of abuse, touching or being touched in sexual areas, oral sex, rape or being otherwise penetrated. Any of these categories would also cause significant harm to an individual's spirituality. Whereas many of the case studies in *Reflect and Respond* focus on the harm caused by sexual abuse, the writers wish to acknowledge that all

forms of abuse have a persistent and negative effect on a person, especially when the abuse occurs in childhood.

Supporting people through the legacy of abuse

While leaders of the *Reflect and Respond* study are not expected to be experts in supporting survivors of abuse, it is helpful for them to have a general understanding of the type of problems affecting survivors. All types of abuse have an element of psychological harm and are an attack on a person's psyche. The experience of being abused profoundly changes how survivors think of and experience themselves, others and the world. Therefore, some of the most common issues survivors of abuse struggle with include: shame, guilt, chronic stress, anxiety, depression, flashbacks, addiction, low self-esteem and inability to trust others, often leading to excessive self-reliance and relationship difficulties.

Inclusion

The Methodist Church aims to live out its theological conviction that all people are made in the image of God and that God's love is for all². Yet there have been too many incidents of discrimination, coercive control and abuse of power within the life of the Methodist Church, which have not been prevented or even challenged.

Inclusion is seen as a universal human right and its aim is to embrace all people irrespective of race, gender identity, status, sexuality, mental or physical impairment or any other need. It is about giving equal access and opportunities and getting rid of discrimination and intolerance by removing

2 The Methodist Church Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity: www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/news/latest-news/all-news/justice-dignity-and-solidarity/

barriers. Do not miss the signs of abuse just because someone is different to you or because it is 'just their culture'. Do not assume that an older or disabled person, or someone who is a carer, cannot be a perpetrator, or a victim, of historical or current abuse.

The Challenge

The writers of this Bible study and leaders' guide understand this is a scary subject for most people. But what we are asking is that you face this fear, that you listen to a friend, that you sit silently with a person in pain, that you hold that person's coat whilst they wrestle with God. Most of the writers of this leaders' guide were victims of childhood sexual abuse and each of them has been through years of profound difficulty. Survivors of abuse can and do recover (and if you are on that traumatic journey and reading this guide right now, the writers pray that this will give you a glimmer of hope). However, for the rest of you undertaking to lead this *Reflect and Respond* study, we hope you will feel more equipped to offer support to people as they travel on this most difficult of roads. Many victims of abuse, though not all, will need professional long-term support, but they will also need their friends.

Who to go to for support

Please contact your District Safeguarding Officer, whose details are available on the Methodist Church website³ or your district website. They will be able to supply you with advice and guidance covering both practical planning on how to deliver the course and also where to signpost group members who need focused support. The District Safeguarding Officer will also be able to advise on what direct support the Methodist Church can offer to survivors of abuse.

3 The Methodist Church Safeguarding webpage: www.methodist.org.uk/safeguarding/i-have-a-concern-contacts/methodist-safeguarding-contacts/

The **Methodist** Church 

Methodist Church House

25 Marylebone Road

London NW1 5JR

Tel: 020 7486 5502

www.methodist.org.uk