



## Equality Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit

### **Module 1.2**

## Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

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All participants should receive a copy of this *Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* document when they attend their first session.

It does not need to be considered in detail every time, but participants should be introduced to it at least once, and made aware that that this is the starting point for all our work on EDI issues in the Methodist Church.

## Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

1. It is the Church's intention to value every human being as part of God's creation and the whole people of God. At the heart of the Methodist community is a deep sense of the place of welcome, hospitality and openness, which demonstrates the nature of God's grace and love for all. Our church communities are called to be places where the transformational love of God is embodied and life in all its fullness is a gift which is offered to all people. There are no distinctions based on race, gender, disability, age, wealth or sexuality, or any discrimination associated with this gift. Yet, it is important to recognise that this does not mean there are no boundaries or limits to the Church's inclusivity and hospitality. The boundaries which exist in the Church enable it to remain faithful to its identity as the Body of Christ and to seek to be a safe space for those who participate in its communal life. Ever open to the revelation of God, the Church (with prayerful discernment) continues to reflect on where these boundaries appropriately lie and how it embodies the love and grace of God. God loves all people unconditionally, and we seek to live out that unconditional love in every part of church life.
2. Issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, though critical in both contemporary theological reflection and the witness of the Church, cannot be derived easily from the Bible. The Bible is the record of God's dealings with humankind, consisting of narratives through which we discern God's nature and purposes. This means that theological ideas emerge in particular cultural contexts, though they are not necessarily bound by them. One cannot easily extract principles from isolated incidents or sayings. The Bible is not specific on matters of equality, and contains stories of discrimination against people, enslavement, sexual violence against women, and the equating of disability with sin. Yet we can also discern broader themes emerging from the narratives that issue a severe challenge to these stories. Recognition of the challenges involved in interpreting Scripture, alongside recognition of the rich resources it provides, leads not only to the need for continuing study and reflection regarding issues of equality, diversity and inclusion but also to the need for challenge where the inappropriate use of Scripture leads to discriminatory attitudes and practices. Nonetheless, themes emerge from the biblical narratives that offer guidance for the Church's engagement with contemporary culture.
3. The traditions and history of the Church reveal changing perspectives and consensuses over the inclusion or exclusion of particular peoples in different ways and for different reasons, and often the Church has not spoken with a single voice. There are biblical passages that deal with God's election of particular people, and the Church's views on slavery and the ordination of women, for example, have seen considerable change. Therefore, the Church's collective understanding of God's purpose and truth has changed over time. The Church is a pilgrim Church. We expect that Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience will continue to reveal truth as the Methodist people carry on reflecting on these issues in all areas of Church life and as part of their discipleship. The following strands of biblical, Methodist, and the broader Christian thought offer some resources for further reflection.

### Theological resources for reflection

4. Human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and are loved by God. Each one of us is unique and valued by God, and thus the intrinsic worth of every human being is to be upheld. Such worth is afforded through the act of being created and is not related to the behaviour of human beings, nor to their stage in life from birth to death.
5. Jesus, the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3) is the fulfilment of the Scriptures. He shared our human experience. He was rejected, betrayed and put to death on the cross. His death and resurrection is God's ultimate statement of grace and supreme act of inclusion.
6. In his ministry, Jesus showed God's love by his openness to all people, including reaching out to those who were marginalised in his day. He touched untouchable people such as lepers (Mark 1:39-45),

restored those whom society had banished to unclean or marginal places (Mark 5:1-20), healed others whose physical impairments marginalised them (Mark 10:46-52), proclaimed blessings for the poor (Luke 6:20) and forgave men and women whose perceived conduct had caused outrage (Luke 7:36-50; Luke 19:1-10; John 7:53 – 8:11).

7. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus a new community was created which experienced a foretaste of the divine life, intended by God for all humankind. Sometimes this life was described as salvation, sometimes, especially in John's Gospel (John 3:15), as eternal life, the life of God's new age. The effects of God's salvation transcended the lives of individual people. A new society was inaugurated in which old boundaries and divisions were, at the very least, recast in new ways, and bonds were cemented through the action of the Holy Spirit. Strangers became friends (Acts 2:42-47) and people understood their relationships to others in new ways (John 19:25-27; Romans 8:29; Hebrews 2:10-11).
8. It was the witness of the early Church, affirmed in Paul's letter to the Galatians (Galatians 3:28) that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, because we are one in Jesus Christ. Yet the Church took time to work through the consequences of this and it continues to do so today. As time went on old divisions would be questioned and even broken down (Ephesians 2:11-16); others, though exposed now to the new light of the gospel, would take much longer and yet more, still unknown to or unacknowledged by New Testament writers, were to be challenged by the gospel in centuries to come (such as slavery or the role of women).
9. The Church owes its being to the grace of God in Christ. From the very first the Church understood its true life to be Christ-centred, and therefore God-centred. The diversity of identity and gifts given to God's people is not an end in itself, but is for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ. Galatians 3:28-29 reminds us that our unity is not found in our intrinsic nature, but through our common redemption in Jesus Christ. If one part of the body suffers, the whole suffers. We acknowledge the necessity of working with those with whom we disagree, or whose Christian experience lies outside our own and makes demands on our behaviour, as a discipline of the Body of Christ.
10. Christ is at the centre of the Church's life, through the gift of the Spirit. The Church in each place is a gathering together, in the Spirit, of people from all sorts of backgrounds and at all stages of faith, to be one community of mutual sharing, mutual service and mutual edification; praising God together, searching the Scriptures and sharing in the Lord's Supper. Relationships in any community are a crucial barometer of its health and well-being. That is especially true of a church, since it is called to be a sign, a foretaste and an agent of God's kingdom for everyone. The phrase "each other" in the NRSV this is mostly translated as "one another" occurs many times in the New Testament letters: "accept each other" (Romans 15:7, NIV), "encourage each other", (1 Thessalonians 4:18, NIV), "bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2, NIV and NRSV). The list could go on, but all these commands are expressions of the "new commandment" which Jesus gave, "Love one another as I have loved you", (John 13:34). Such a loving relationship is only possible as a reflection of the unconditional love of God and the discipline of loving our neighbour as ourselves, embodied in the working of the local church in its community.
11. "In later Trinitarian doctrine (anticipated in the New Testament), Christians, in differing ways, have also found a model for the life of the Church. For example, to speak of God as a loving communion of three co-equal 'persons' suggests that the Church should be a community of mutual support and love in which there is no superiority or inferiority. Or, we may speak, as the Nicene Creed does, of the Holy Spirit 'proceeding' from the Father (and the Son), indicating how the outgoing, all-embracing love of God for God's creation flows through the Son and the Spirit. Such an understanding of the Trinity is authenticated when the Church shares in God's mission to the world." (Called to Love and Praise, 1999, §2.1.9)

12. Methodism understands itself to be a connexional Church. Connexionalism is identified in terms of belonging, mutuality and interdependence. All Christians are essentially linked to one another; no local church is or can be an autonomous unit complete in itself. At the heart of such interdependent relationships is conversation (which implies a resolve to listen as well as to speak, to overcome differences and move towards shared understandings). The practice of Christian conferring characterises the way in which Methodists make decisions, theologically reflect and enter into relationships within and beyond the Church.
13. The Methodist Church, drawing on its Arminian heritage, emphasises the universality of God's grace, freely offered to all peoples irrespective of their condition. Within Methodism all are welcome in the broadest sense. The emphasis is on God's grace for all, without any exceptions; and on transformational possibilities in personal and relational life for all, beyond what can be expected or predicted. It is an invitation to which all are invited to respond. Hospitality, openness and welcome to all are at the heart of what it means to be a Methodist. The Church strives to be an inclusive community, but at the same time acknowledges the need for discipline and, in extreme circumstances, the exclusion of those who damage the integrity of the Church or obstruct human flourishing. Accordingly, a theology of hospitality involves establishing the boundaries to this hospitality, and in particular ensuring that they are constructed consonant with divine grace and not our own prejudices. Whilst seeking to manifest God's unconditional love, churches are not so much places of unconditional welcome but of a more radical, robust hospitality that offers the gospel invitation in ways that are just and safe, affirm the dignity of all, and have integrity.
14. The Wesleyan doctrine of perfect love leads us to seek, in every aspect of our individual and corporate lives, growth in holiness and grace. We seek relationships that go beyond toleration into a deeper appreciation of how God is working in the other person. The holiness of the Church has two dimensions. First, it denotes the Church's standing before God: the Church is holy simply because it belongs to God, and it is entirely dependent on the gift of God's Spirit. This is why the praise of God is the Church's fundamental vocation and characteristic activity. Second, the marks of holiness which the Church is called to show are those which can be seen in the life of Jesus, the holy one of God. So holiness is not an otherworldly characteristic; it is a Christlike one, deriving from the God whose very being was "imprinted" on Jesus (Hebrews 1:3). In the Methodist tradition, Christian holiness has been defined as 'perfect love' and such an understanding makes clear both the inner dynamic and the outward expression of the Church's life. Like unity, it is both gift and aspiration.
15. Methodists understand that salvation is the ongoing experience of God's loving, transforming presence; enabling us to grow and transform and become the people God intended, enabling us to grow in our ability to live as Jesus did, deepening our knowledge and love of God, and manifesting that love through the ways in which we live our lives. The sanctifying nature of divine grace working in God's people leads the Church to become a community that transforms wider society. Christians participate in God's work in the world and service is a fundamental part of our discipleship. Part of the Church's mission is its commitment to social justice.
16. A Christian way of living in anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom of God can remain difficult to sustain both for individuals and for the Church as an institution. We reflect the divine image in a broken way. This has been true from the beginning. The New Testament does not know of a perfect Christian community, and human sinfulness has not diminished with the passage of time. The life of the Church is eroded by it; its symptoms and results include fractured relationships (both personal and communal), unwitting exclusivisms, and discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, age, wealth or sexuality. The Church in the past has excluded many, believing it was acting fairly and justly by adhering to its well established boundaries. The Church is challenged to acknowledge the ways in which it fails to live up to its calling, and to continue to reflect prayerfully on the boundaries it establishes. Furthermore, we must always be alert to any inadvertent exclusion and prejudice through our ignorance rather than a conscious desire not to be a place of sanctuary, refuge, safety and love for the marginalised. The

Church is reminded of its own need for forgiveness and grace, and turns to God to seek new life in Jesus Christ.

17. The Church must always remember it is God's Church and as such it must remain faithful to God's calling and mission. The boundaries which exist should only serve to preserve the God-given identity of the Church. In this way only, the Church's inclusivity cannot be described as limitless, nor should it be. The Church continues to seek the gift of the Holy Spirit in discerning appropriate boundaries which are faithful to its divine calling. This presents many challenges and we need to deepen our learning and reflect on the decisions we make regarding our boundaries, and recognise when we have made mistakes. These decisions should remain contingent and provisional.
18. The Church's commitment to matters of equality, diversity and inclusion is founded on the premise that God's love is universal, and that it is God's will that all should be drawn into deeper experience and understanding of the life and purpose of God. As a manifestation of the Body of Christ, the Church is called to worship God and to witness to God's saving grace to humankind. As such, it is called to exist not only for its own sake, but for the life of the world.