

Written Service - Sunday 4th June 2023
Discipleship Pathways Series:
**Challenging Injustice - Equality,
Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)**
Written by Marc Williamson.

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As part of “A Methodist Way of Life” we have been encouraging our churches to consider the discipleship pathways highlighted by the Methodist Church. These pathways are to help us as we seek to live as disciples of Jesus. The twelve areas for our individual and collective journeys are:

Worship; Prayer; Notice; Care; Learn;
Open; Serve; Flourish; Challenge; Tell;
Live; and Share.

(Find out more at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/>)

Today we're going to be spending time considering “Challenge”, and specifically thinking about what it means for us to challenge injustice, and to be people and churches committed to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

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As we begin our worship, take a moment to be still. Consider where you are sat with this service. Give thanks for the comfort and security of your seat, for the roof above your head, or the sun in the sky. Appreciate the gifts of the food you have eaten and the needs that have been met so far today. Pay attention to the fact you have access to this act of worship, for your education and ability to participate in this written material.

Already we are becoming aware of certain privileges that allow us this

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moment to stop and worship. To learn and to grow. May God bless this moment, and by the influence of God's Holy Spirit may we become more like Jesus.

AMEN

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The opening song in Singing the Faith invites us all to bring our praise to the Lord:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6ldQNsFUEw>)

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice:
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell;
come ye before him and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make:
we are his folk, he doth us feed;
and for his sheep he doth us take.

O enter then his gates with praise;
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

For why, the Lord our God is good;
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
the God whom heaven and earth adore,
from earth and from the angel host
be praise and glory evermore.

William Kethe

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The Methodist Church is committed to being a place of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). That means we seek to recognise and celebrate the image of God found in all people, and that we want our churches to be places of safety and refuge, where all people may find love and belonging, a family and a home.

We follow the person and teachings of Jesus, and celebrate the outpouring of God's unconditional love through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet there have been times in our church history (and in our church today) as well as our societal structures and systems (which we once thought made ours a "Christian country") when individuals have been devalued, excluded, oppressed and abused because of their "otherness". This has included and includes (but is in no way limited to) those who are not white, not male, not straight, not educated, not able-bodied.

Such distinctions and discriminations have been made consciously in our past and still permeate our unconscious through our biases today, both inside the church, and in socio-economic and cultural structures in everyday life.

Our commitment to EDI calls us to be people who challenge the injustices we see both inside and outside of the church, confessing where we have failed to celebrate diversity and include all people in our celebration of the love of God.

The prophets sought to return people to the heart of God, a heart for the poor, the orphaned, the widow, the outcast and the stranger, as well as for the people of God. Micah declares that God has shown us what is required: To act

justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uozc-9XWoBo>)

God of justice, Saviour to all,
came to rescue the weak and the poor;
chose to serve and not be served.
Jesus, you have called us.
Freely we've received,
now freely we will give.

Chorus:

*We must go, live to feed the hungry,
stand beside the broken, we must go.
Stepping forward,
keep us from just singing,
move us into action, we must go.*

To act justly every day,
loving mercy in every way,
walking humbly before you, God.
You have shown us what you require.
Freely we've received,
now freely we will give.

Chorus

Fill us up and send us out,
fill us up and send us out,
fill us up and send us out, Lord.
Fill us up and send us out,
fill us up and send us out,
fill us up and send us out, Lord.

Chorus

Tim Hughes

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Let us pray.

*"He has shown you what is good.
What does the Lord require of you?
To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk
humbly with your God."*

Micah 6:8

God you are good, and you call us to reflect your goodness. That goodness is to be seen in our worship of you, our kindness to ourselves, and our love for our neighbour. So often we struggle to live out that goodness in our everyday lives. In this moment we call to mind our shortcomings, not to shame us or in order to make us feel guilty, but to use them as an opportunity to rest in your grace, to accept your forgiveness, and to recommit to recognising your Spirit at work within us, that we might once again reflect and represent your goodness into our world.

There are so many in our world who long to see your goodness. There are so many who have been disproportionately affected by those who fail to act justly. May we see a rise in the number and volume of the voices of those seeking to challenge injustice, and a redistribution of power that will see your kingdom of justice in our time. May we see an outpouring of loving kindness to those who are broken and oppressed, that they may know your love and peace. May they have confidence that you, and your people are for them, and may they know life in all its fulness through relationship with you, your people and your world in the present age and in what is to come. May we all know what it is to come humbly before you, to offer you our burdens in seeking your peace, our pride in seeking your way, and our privileges in seeking your heart.

God of justice, saviour to all, fill us up and send us out.

AMEN

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What does that goodness look like in our world? One sign might look like service:

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

Richard A. M. Gillard

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Our bible reading for this service is from **1 Corinthians 12:12-27**. As you consider the text below, I wonder what jumps out at you? How does it make you feel?

Unity and Diversity in the Body

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form

one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

15 Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Now you’ve read the passage and thought about it from your perspective,

I’d like you to revisit it, but to imagine yourself reading it through someone else’s eyes and experience. I’d particularly like you to consider how this passage might be received and understood by someone who has traditionally been excluded or made to feel different by society and even Christianity. For example, how might someone from an ethnic minority understand this passage? How might someone from the LGBTQI+ community (someone who has a different sexual orientation or gender identity, experience or expression) identify themselves in this passage? Would you read this passage differently if you didn’t know where your next meal was coming from?

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How did you find that? It might be that it was difficult because you don’t spend much time with people who are different to you, and therefore it’s hard to put yourself in their shoes. Don’t worry if it was difficult. Perhaps try this exercise again with a different passage at some point and see if it becomes easier.

It might be that it felt uncomfortable as you used both your empathy and your imagination. That’s to be expected. Sometimes things that we take for granted, or only ever look at through our own eyes make us uncomfortable as we consider other peoples’ experiences.

As we use this passage to think about EDI and challenging injustice, I want to just make 3 very quick and relatively simple observations that will hopefully inspire some reflection.

1. What colour is the body of Christ?

The faith I inherited from my parents and the traditions I grew up in painted

both Jesus and God as white. A western Jesus always had blond hair and blue eyes, and even spoke English. For the largest part of my Christian development every part of the Trinity had been made in my image, both consciously and unconsciously. White Jesus walked the earth. White God judged from Heaven. And the white Spirit empowered the white church. But Jesus was far from white. And besides, this passage is talking about the body of Christ, not the body of Jesus.

The body of Christ is the living outworking of the Gospel hope here on earth. The body of Christ, with Jesus at the head, is a mismatched mosaic of the diverse nature of humanity, including all those seeking to live out the Kingdom values of love, joy, hope and peace, that all may know life in all its fulness. The body of Christ is not white, and does not seek to make every part the same, but it is representative of all colour: it is colour-full. Nor is it colour blind, rather it celebrates the beauty of all colours. It also recognises that the "colour" of the body is made up not just of the skin tones of the people living as disciples, but also all the things that make us diverse in our shared humanity.

2. One body, many parts.

We, collectively, are the body, and each one of us is a part of it. Each of us as individuals bring ourselves to be part of the whole. As part of the body we are a representative of the whole, but none of us are a complete picture without the rest of the body.

There are several things that connect the body together, but here's a quick overview of two.

The first is the head and the central nervous system. In our passage Jesus

is the head and is therefore the driving force behind movement. It is through the connected central nervous system that we are sensitive to the world around us and are able to respond accordingly to what is going on by getting our guidance from Jesus.

The second is the heart. The circulatory system is what channels the life around the body. It is where the oxygen we breathe is distributed to every part of the body. When the hearts pumps life through the body there is power to move. The heart (and perhaps the gut) is also traditionally that place where we know where love is and what is right.

All the parts of this body of disciples, seeking to be the body of Christ in our world, are connected by these two systems. Such a mismatched collection of parts without this capacity to think and feel and to show love looks more like the body of Frankenstein than the body of Christ!

Yet church history and society have taught us to devalue some parts of the body that were deemed too different to the white Jesus we considered earlier. To put it bluntly, down the years the church and society have cut people out of the body due to their skin colour, age, gender, sexuality, disability and/or a whole host of other reasons, and as such has ended up looking more like Frankenstein's monster than the beauty of the diversity of the living body of Christ. Not only has the church been disabled by such exclusive behaviour, but it has also disconnected itself from the model and headship of Christ and from adequately reflecting the heart of God to the world.

The body of Christ as described by Paul celebrates the diversity that is unified

(though importantly not made uniform - diversity is maintained) through the person of Jesus, the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. Bodily Functions

All parts of this connected body are interdependent. Where “dependence” is solely relying on the strength of others and “independence” is relying on ones own strength”, “interdependence” is about how we have strength to share and rely on each other.

The body is made of parts that fulfil functions and that need each other in order for the whole body to work. Even those parts we’d rather not think about do important jobs. When parts stop working they limit our capacity, and when we choose to disregard, cut off or not look after parts of our body we bring problems on ourselves.

As one body we are charged with concern for every individual part, sharing in both honour and suffering with each other. When one part of the body suffers we should all feel it. Why would we want to limit the capacity of the body by excluding parts? Why would we want to limit the sharing of the gospel by turning away disciples who are different?

In summary:

As a community of disciples we are the body of Christ. We need to be aware of, and celebrate the diversity of that body. Through the inclusion and equal honouring of all parts of this body we will be best placed to experience and share life in all its fulness. To do this we will need to be honest about our expectations of what the body of Christ looks like and redress the balance of power. We will need to recognise where

we have excluded some people and how we have favoured others.

Only when we have done that will we be able to courageously challenge injustice outside of the church and use our collective body to bring about the Kingdom of God in the communities around us. More may then be welcomed into the body of Christ, increasing our capacity to show love and compassion to the world.

May we find ourselves in a loving cycle of recognition and celebration of diversity, inclusion, equality, and subsequent outpouring of the love of God to all people.

AMEN

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In 2003 the band “Casting Crowns” penned the following words in a song titled “If we are the body.” What do these words say to you about how we’re doing as the body of Christ? What, if anything, do you think you and your church could begin to do to be more inclusive as a body?

*Jesus paid much too high a price
For us to pick and choose
who should come
And we are the body of Christ:*

*If we are the body
Why aren't his arms reaching?
Why aren't his hands healing?
Why aren't his words teaching?
And if we are the body
Why aren't his feet going?
Why is his love not showing
them there is a way?*

(The full song can be listened to here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fouqn5Xg5-E>)

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Jesus is the one we call the Christ, and yet Paul charges us to be the body of Christ in the here and now. To do that we need to be the living example of the inclusive love of Christ, and therefore full of compassion.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dGoK_piBG4)

Jesus you delight in showing mercy

You have shared a table with a thief
You embrace the orphan and you say
“now follow me...
I am fighting for the least of these”

You have graced this world
with your forgiveness
You have turned the tables with a kiss
You have laid your life down and you
say “now follow me...
You will find me with the least of these”

Chorus

*To be like You, full of compassion
To be like You, Jesus
To do as You do,
to love without measure
To be like You, Jesus*

You are moved
to heal the brokenhearted
You have laid a table for a feast
You invite the outcast
and you say “now come and eat...
There’s enough to fill your every need”
You’re enough to fill our every need

Chorus

And let our lives be a pure
reflection of You God
The thoughts of our hearts
And the words of our mouths be of You

Chorus

Bazi Baker, Mary Beattie, Andy Campbell,
Chloe Williams & Jason Henderson

— — —

As we draw this act of worship to a close, I wonder what you’ll take away? I wonder whether you’re sitting as comfortably as you were at the start of our time together? Have you been able to identify times where you have seen exclusion, inequality, or a disregard for diversity? Have you considered the blessing and privilege you may have had by being treated as equal, included, or celebrated for your identity?

I recently wrote and recorded an act of worship for a local Secondary School on the theme of “Courageously Inclusive.” If you wanted to explore more about what it would mean for our churches and our society to truly be places of inclusion then you could spend some time watching the act of worship on the circuit’s YouTube channel via the link below, and then perhaps talking with a small group about what we could do as disciples and as the body of Christ to ensure we are challenging injustice and committing to equality, diversity and inclusion.

At the end of the video below I prayed the following:

Hebrews 12:14 says - *“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone”*

Every effort. That’s not “do the bare minimum.” That’s “do all you can.” Some of us are in a privileged position and can do more than others... Peace has to be about community and equality. It has to be about either an absence of power, or, better still, an equal distribution of power between all people, it’s about ownership and partnership, collectiveness and collaboration or as Philippians 2:3-4 says:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

That's real inclusion, and it requires courage. It takes courage to give up or share power. It takes courage to use privilege for the benefit of others. It takes courage to bring about change in ourselves and the communities we are part of in order to be truly inclusive and recognise the humanity of anyone who is in any way different to us and our inherited norms.

It also takes courage for those the systems don't favour to keep fighting and be true to themselves; To remember and claim dignity and worth; To not conform to the societal norms; and to work together to change the system.

If you have ever felt like you have had to fight and struggle against the system, or that you have to fit in and conform in order to be loved and included, may you know your infinite beauty and value.

May you know that you are no less wonderful in the eyes of God, and those of us who want to do better. May you see changes in our world that mean you have belonging and inclusion in the communities we share together where those who have gone before have been excluded.

If like me you are becoming aware of your privilege, may we together use it well for the benefit of those who are less privileged by western society.

May we also be aware of our infinite beauty and value in our shared humanity.

May we all, together, be part of bringing about changes that make our communities courageously inclusive.

AMEN

(Courageously inclusive: <https://youtu.be/iGLMXIW-Jhs>)

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Our closing hymn and prayer is one that I often wonder whether we should be singing. It's one that is powerful and hope-filled, but it's one that we need to reflect on and commit to, in order to stop it being just empty words with a nice tune. We need to move beyond just singing it as a song, to implementing the changes that would be needed in our lives and churches if we actually mean it.

Before you sing it might be an idea to read through the words and remind yourself of what they say.

Consider if it is something you are really ready to commit to.

Is this really the house, the body, that we want to build and be part of?

Are we really ready and willing to welcome all, provide safety for all, heed the voices of the prophets, and recognise the image of God in all people?

If we mean it, what might the implications be and what might we need to change?

If we're not there yet, is there a genuine aspiration to be a church and a society that can declare "all are welcome in this place"?

Chorus

**Let us build a house
where love can dwell**
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell
how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ
shall end divisions:

Chorus:

*All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.*

Let us build a house
where prophets speak,
and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:

Chorus

Let us build a house
where love is found
in water, wine and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground
where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ
the feast that frees us:

Chorus

Let us build a house
where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen,
serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:

Let us a build a house
where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured,
taught and claimed
as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim
from floor to rafter:

Chorus

Marty Haugen

— — —

May we, the body of Christ, celebrate
the image of God in the diversity of
humanity.

May we, the disciples of Jesus, follow
his example of championing equality
and empowering the disenfranchised.

May we, filled with the Spirit, challenge
injustice wherever we see it, including in
the church.

May we, the church of Christ, be known
for our love and inclusion.

AMEN