

Becoming a more fully inclusive Methodist Church: Why does it matter?

Here, below, are some quotations from real Methodists which show how we need to change and what a difference it makes when we do!

This work (our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion work) is about all people being made in the image of God, it is about a Biblical call to justice, it is about incarnation, it is about the gifting of the Holy Spirit to all baptised people, and is about so much more than equality, diversity and inclusion.

We care about these issues because we are people of faith and disciples of Jesus Christ. The Gospel imperative is that Christ is for all. We are united in Christ. We are called to 'love our neighbours as ourselves'.

Below there are quotations which show what some Methodist people around the country have been facing.

- A. "It was several years after being told I wasn't suitable for the position – and doing considerable self-searching to understand why – that I was brave enough to discuss it with others. That's when I realised my rejection was actually systemic. No one 'like me' was deemed suitable."
- B. "There were always two ordained ministers in each church's staff team, but I was the only woman with four men. When the minister of another church heard that my colleague was retiring, he, looking directly at me, said "so [that church] won't have a minister then."
- C. "Some people try to be kind and mean well, but can be so patronising. I wheeled myself all the way to church and was feeling quite chipper and proud. The welcome steward took one look at the chair and said, 'Oh, I'm so sorry'."
- D. At our Local Preachers' Meeting I heard somebody say, "Well we'll have a problem next year because we'll have two Ghanaians and a Sri Lankan in training". Why am I a problem? It made me want to give up there and then"
- E. "I fear that should we fail to embrace this pilgrimage, or should we abandon it because it is too demanding or too dangerous, or too difficult, we will have turned our backs on the gospel and have no good news for the world."

- F. "I have been a member of the church council for five years but never felt comfortable speaking. I left school at 16. When documents are circulated before meetings, I can follow without difficulty, but other council members have resisted making this standard practice. I have recently undergone training at circuit level with more large documents and dense PowerPoint slides which have further knocked my confidence. The nature of my work makes it difficult for me to guarantee my availability for meetings in advance. This has resulted in hurtful questioning of my dedication and commitment."
- G. "I wasn't 'out out' at church but just because it wasn't something I felt the need to shout about because it's who I've always been. I've never hidden it but no one's ever asked. My friends knew, and it came up occasionally at youth group, so I assumed that the leaders knew. They never mentioned that God wouldn't love me the same, so it never occurred to me that anyone of my faith wouldn't love everyone regardless of their sexuality... when it was made obvious that I was wrong, I cried so much. So much hatred. So much fear. And for what? I wasn't trying to seduce their wives? I wasn't a sexual deviant preying on the vulnerable. I just wanted to be loved for who I was."
- H. "I stopped being a Reader for the Bible readings and a Communion Steward because the new, higher dais did not include a ramp and I need wheelchair access."
- I. "I am a member of a church on the boundary between the well-off part of town and a large housing estate. I became increasingly worried by the attitudes of church members and suggested the church could start outreach in the estate. Members expressed concerns about the effect outreach onto the estate would have on the church, using stereotype language like scroungers, benefits cheats, lazy unemployed. I was told, 'We don't want them in our church.'"
- J. "I've been told, 'By having you on the committee, you are helping us because we can tick the inclusivity box.'" "It's been a privilege to be at Conference but I would have liked to offer when I was younger. Nobody told me it was free to go there and although I would have taken the week off and it didn't occur to me that anybody else would cover my expenses!"
- K. "There is always that sideways glance, that extra eye roving taking in what I am wearing or how I look, and no matter how hard I try, it is always up for scrutiny, more so than if a white person were wearing exactly the same. I feel that if I ever offer anything in church council or at any church meeting, there is always a

downward glance, an intake of breath, a benign smile at the corner of lips, a lip service tolerance of 'allowing' me to speak, but my words are not heard, only the rhythm and pitch of my voice. I wish I didn't have to carry these feelings, I wish I didn't have to stay silent for fear of rocking the boat. I wish I didn't feel so alone in Church."

On the other hand... here are some quotations which show what a difference it can make to pay attention to one another and to change our way of living so that all people can participate equally in the Methodist Church.

- a) "I am dyslexic, and I find it very difficult to use either the screen or the normal print size copy of Singing the Faith. One of the churches where I am the minister, when I told them I was having problems, invested in large print copies of the hymn book, and put one in the vestry so I would always have it ready for services. It felt good to be cared about in that very practical way. Along with making sure there is always coloured paper in the photocopier for me, it shows how simple steps can make a big difference."
- b) "I've been really impressed that my district's District Policy Committee has changed its meeting times so that I can join in. They didn't need to, at one level, but as I work it would have been impossible to go along to the meetings, even after I was voted in as a younger person. They've all put themselves out so that I can take part and I appreciate that."
- c) "I have suffered from poor mental health for many years, and living in a small rural place, where everyone knows a lot about everyone else, can make me want to hide. However, I have found the church to be very supportive. When I have down days I can share with people and know that they will be praying. When I have good days, I can share that too and people will rejoice with me. The church community really has become my family. Even in lock-down they have only been a What's App group message away."
- d) "Even though people knew me at church as a girl as a child they have accepted me for who I am over all these years and they show that they love me however I might change"
- e) "This will demand, of us all, penitence and hope, patience and commitment. But what if our life together were to be imagined as an ever-changing dance, where new steps can be introduced, and new rhythms and movements explored; where each encounter with 'the other' was approached as an opportunity to experience enrichment as we discover new aspects of our shared humanity?"

- f) "I've been given the opportunity and responsibility to ignite a young-person-led movement for other young people, 'empowering young leaders' in the district. My thoughts and ideas have been recognised and acted upon which has left me feeling strongly valued."
- g) "The other Local Preachers have made me so welcome and when they don't understand me they just ask me to repeat myself until they 'get' me. It can be hard speaking in my third language in church but people are so encouraging and I get the sense they are excited to hear from my experience of life, faith and the world."
- h) "The difference it makes is amazing. My church has started a scheme for helping us to pool our money and now I can afford better food, even trips out occasionally (when COVID lets me of course!) because people are generous and they've found a way of helping me to share with others and to keep my self-respect."
- i) "I cried during the prayers the first time that my minister used the word 'Siblings' to describe us all because I suddenly knew I was recognised. As a non-binary person I never felt included by 'brothers and sisters' but when my minister said, one Sunday, "Brothers, sisters, siblings" I knew she had noticed me. That helped me see that God notices me too."
- j) I feel part of a movement that is bravely lifting heads towards God, being given the chance to speak out against injustice and for my words to have been heard and understood. The nature of my heart has been felt, not the colour of my skin. For once in my UK Church life, I feel the warmth of hope in reality and not just silently in my heart."
- k) "As I have carried on in this church, God has not taken away my mental illness, but he has removed the sting from it by enabling me to have insight into my illness and manage it very well. My identity is not defined by my illness. I am proud to call myself a Christian. I think this is from God's Holy Spirit living in me. He also gives me a wonderful sense of belonging to God's family on earth."

These are real examples, though anonymous.

They show the difference that our attitudes can make.

Let's pray to be able to see people as God sees them.

Let's learn from one another, all made in the image of God.

Working towards a fully
inclusive Methodist Church

www.methodist.org.uk/inclusive-mc-strategy

