The Methodist Church

The Methodist Church Inclusive Language Guide

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.
Galatians 3:26 (NRSV)

Introduction

Why do we offer this guide?

As Christians, we need to have the courage for conversations that can sometimes be difficult, to recognise that we sometimes exclude people, to listen with humility, to repent of any hurtful language and to take care with how we listen and what we say or write, in the Spirit of Christ. Good, open, encouraging conversations, based on careful listening, are central to all positive relationships, including those within the Church. Using careful and positive language is key to effective ministry and mission.

What is meant by inclusive language?

Speaking, worshipping and writing in an inclusive way is about engaging positively with as many people as possible. At times we might find that people feel excluded or harmed by something we say, not because we have any bad intentions, but simply because our turn of phrase was automatic, or unconscious. When we make an effort to use inclusive language, we are simply trying to be more aware.

God has created all human beings as unique and diverse from one another. We can expect our congregations and communities to be made up of many, many different expressions of individuality rather than assume, or expect, anyone to be 'just like us'. This guide signposts organisations with specific knowledge and experience of including particular groups of people who have been, or still sometimes find themselves, left out of mainstream language. Though general guidance will be provided here, it's a good idea to consult with people who have been excluded for whatever reason, to see what they say about how they would like to be addressed and included in language (see 'Organisations that may help'). If you have accessibility needs for these pages, such as alternative formats or languages, please send your request to: publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk

How might you use this guide?

It might help with conversations and with learning and understanding people from different communities than your own. You might be someone who already appreciates having these sorts of conversations. You might be someone who has found someone else's language offensive and this guide may support you with raising these issues. You may be a preacher or minister who wants to ensure your ministry is accessible and open to everybody. Someone may have told you that something you have said is offensive or exclusive and this may help to explain why. You may be producing a document to be

circulated to a church audience and want to ensure you represent the Church as well as possible.

As our understanding of one another evolves, so should the language we use to communicate. This guide is not a list of words that must be avoided, but a set of principles on how to use language inclusively depending on context and to whom you are speaking. It may be helpful as a tool of reference, or as a starting point for conversations within the Church on how language can be a part of living out Our Calling as Methodists. We are all certain to make mistakes at some point if we are brave enough to have honest conversations.

Learning Together

If you hear something within the Methodist Church that you find difficult or offensive, please assume 'good intent' until you are sure. This could be due to generational differences, to ignorance of your own life experience or, sadly, it could be due to prejudice.

If you feel safe and confident enough, do think about explaining why that language makes you feel excluded or disrespected. Sometimes questions can be useful, such as "What makes you use that particular word?" or "Do you realise that expression leaves me out?"

If you would like support with challenging exclusive language please speak to your minister or pastoral worker, or contact equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk

If you have any suggestions or comments on this guide, please email publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk

Why is this important?

Part of the work of being a justice-seeking Church is about recognising and acknowledging that harm has been done to marginalised groups in the past, not just by wider society but at times by the Church itself, and that it is the Church's responsibility to make amends for this.

It is crucial for our communications to be sensitive and inclusive because for such a long time, some groups have been marginalised and/or demonised by common culture. The Church can lead the way in acknowledging the hurt caused to marginalised communities by living out the 'good news' that God includes us all, whoever we are.

Some general principles

Be guided by the individual

In all areas, it is important to listen to how people identify themselves and be guided by that.

Keep in mind when reading the information below that how an individual identifies themselves should always be respected, above and beyond any guidelines.

People, not problems

We want to avoid labelling people or groups of people, or reducing them to the sum total of an experience they may have been through; examples might be ‘drug addicts’ or ‘the poor’. Always put people’s humanity first: ‘people struggling with addiction’ or ‘people on low incomes’ is preferable.

It is important to note that while we promote person-first language, (ie a person who is disabled), there are some people and groups who prefer identity-first language (ie 'a disabled person'). It is important to listen to how people identify themselves and to use this language.

Try to avoid negatives

Even when it is not intended as such, negative language such as ‘regardless of gender, ethnicity…’ or ‘in spite of…’ can be dismissive. This terminology emphasises the otherness of the people being referred to.

Be open to correction

You may use words you consider to be inclusive, but find that someone corrects you. Language is constantly evolving and you may use terms that you were previously taught were acceptable. However, you should be open to listening to the reasons given for not using the word or phrase you have used and understand that their thoughts are as valid as your own. We will all make mistakes but it’s much more important that we try to take on board people’s preferences and risk being corrected than not try at all.

Human relationships come in many varied expressions

There is infinite variety in the way that God’s creation is expressed in human life. This is worth bearing in mind as we speak and write. Terms such as ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ are commonly used. However, they do convey assumptions about a family or personal life that are not the reality for many people. So ‘partner’ may be a good place to start, until you know the term a person uses for themselves.

Similarly, ‘carer’ is a neutral yet understandable way to refer to the carer of a child, who may or not be their parent, until you know their relationship to the child.

Guidance on inclusive language for some specific groups

This section of the guide alphabetically lists some of the main concerns that may arise when trying to use language more consciously in our spoken and written communications.

Ageism

Try not to make assumptions about what people's interests, opinions, or life experiences may be based on their age or demographic. There is no need to refer to people's age at all unless it is relevant to the meaning of what you are saying or writing. If writing about people in general, 'older people' is preferable to 'old people'. Or general terms such as 'retired people' or 'retirees' is acceptable if it is relevant to the context. Try to keep references to age factual: 'people of working age/school age'. Once again, humanity comes first.

Anti-racist language

It's worth considering the need for the Church to take a restorative approach to any communication on the subject of racism, slavery, antisemitism and islamophobia and attempt to speak or write in a way that is not simply 'not racist' but is actively 'anti-racist'. Language is very powerful here. The words used to discuss power, privilege, racism and discrimination mean different things to different people. Language can uphold systems of white supremacy or encourage breaking it down or questioning it.

The Methodist Church uses the term 'ethnicity' rather than 'race' as we reject the theory of inherent biological racial differences and instead affirm that there is only one human race. However, we also need to remember that people have been racialised due to their ethnicity and to overlook this is to ignore their experience. Everybody has an ethnicity and it helps to be aware of our ethnicity and our distinctive differences as we communicate with one another in church."
It is important not to describe people by what they are not… as this implies a 'norm' which is not helpful. Often BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) has been used in public contexts but some individuals may not like to be referred to in this way. It is a catch-all term which highlights minority experience within the UK yet also fails to distinguish between different ethnicities.

For example:
Some people will now refer to themselves as Black British, African British or Caribbean British in recognition of their African ancestry and their British birthplace.

Immigration status and those who have migrated to a different country

Our congregations are becoming increasingly culturally diverse and Methodists have varied immigration status (including students, skilled workers and dependents). Using inclusive language around immigration status helps affirm and acknowledge the legitimacy of everyone as human beings. There is usually no need to refer to somebody's immigration status, but we do need to avoid any negative language in relation to these life

experiences. Those for whom English is not their first language have an additional talent that many of us do not. It is affirming to acknowledge this.

For example:
"She speaks English in addition to other languages."
OR *"She speaks Hindi and is learning English"*
RATHER THAN *"English is not her first language."*

Antisemitism

Antisemitism is any belief, policy or action that discriminates against or incites hatred towards Jewish people, by either race or religion, or caricatures Jewish people and culture. This can include denying the right of Israel to exist, or judging it by standards not applied to other nations. The correct spelling is antisemitism (not anti-semitism or anti-Semitism). It is important not to use a hyphen here, despite what our computer spell-checkers might say.

Care must also be taken when reading and expounding the Bible not to ascribe negative comments about particular groups of Jewish people in a particular time to all Jewish people, including those alive today

Islamophobia

Islamophobia refers to any belief, policy or action that discriminates against or incites hatred towards Muslims or which caricatures Muslim people and culture. Some English speakers tend to mispronounce 'Islam' with a 'z' instead of an 's'. 'Izlam' is an Arabic word that refers to 'getting dark' while 'Islam' means submission, as in submission to Allah/God. Similarly, the word 'Muslim' (one who has submitted to Allah/God) is to be pronounced with an 's' sound rather than a 'z'. The correct spelling is Muslim (NOT Moslem, which used to be widely used interchangeably but is not preferred by most Islamic groups). The term 'Mohammedists' is considered offensive by Muslims as they do not 'worship' Mohammed but follow his teaching that encouraged them to worship only Allah/God. Qur'an is the preferred spelling of the scripture among Islamic organisations.

Disabled and Neurodivergent people

Language can reinforce negative or outdated stereotypes, or it can challenge them. As in the general principles outlined above, we suggest that people's humanity should come first, over and above any reference to their physical or mental capabilities. So use 'people who are disabled' in preference to 'the disabled'; 'wheelchair user' rather than 'wheelchair-bound'.

Whereas many people are 'neurotypical', 'neurodivergent' is used to refer to people with Autism, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia.

‘Neurodiversity’ refers to the whole population, which is diverse. A single individual is not ‘neurodiverse’, but rather ‘neurodivergent’. *For example*: ‘Abi is neurodivergent’ not ‘Abi is neurodiverse’

As stated above, it is important to be led by the individual and use the language they use to identify themselves. While generally, person-first language is preferable, when referencing neurodiversity identity-first language is preferable. For example, ‘autistic person’ rather than ‘person with autism’. This is because neurodivergence is a central aspect of who a person is.

Avoid describing anyone as ‘suffering’ from their particular condition.

In church services or events, small tweaks to language can make people feel much more included if it acknowledges that we are not all physically able to worship in exactly the same way.

It may worthwhile to note that requesting that people stand “if they are able” can create a normalised expectation that people should stand. This can apply to preachers and worship leaders too. For some people who are able to stand but risk falling or suffering other ill-effects from pushing themselves physically, this expectation may be neither safe nor sensible.

An example of language that may be used at the beginning of a service:

> "During the service, some people may stand, sit or take up any other position, please feel welcome to do what is helpful and safe for you."

Mental illness

It is important to be aware that ‘mental health’ is not the same as ‘mental illness’. We all have mental health in the same way that we all have physical health and, just like physical wellbeing, our mental wellbeing can move around a spectrum of positive and negative. Language can play a huge role in the stigma that is attached to some mental health conditions and so we should pay careful consideration to the words we use when discussing mental health.

As with other topics, the person should always come first and not be defined by any diagnosis or condition. So ‘people with a diagnosis of…’ or ‘people living with…’ is better than saying ‘schizophrenics’ or ‘depressives’. As with disability, using positive language wherever possible is encouraged and so try saying ‘experiencing mental health issues’, rather than ‘suffering from’.

The way language is used and perceived is dependent on the person, the context and the intention when using it. However, in general, language that is negative, that sensationalizes or dismisses mental health issues or that puts people in the position of victim is likely to add to the stigma an individual may feel. Conditions or illnesses such as bipolar disorder, PTSD andOCD are real mental health conditions that have a huge, and often debilitating, effect on the people who live with them, so we need to avoid offhand use of these terms in a trivial way.

Gender

Gender-neutral language

We can subconsciously use phrases that may be misinterpreted as us favouring one sex over another such as ‘guys’ or ‘fellows’. In preference to this you might want to use gender-neutral language such as ‘folks’, ‘teammates’, ‘friends’, ‘colleagues’, or simply ‘people’! Similarly the word ‘man’ used as a verb – ‘who is manning the front desk’, for example – can make people feel excluded.

Referring to an adult woman as a ‘girl’ could be read or heard as demeaning, especially if we do not refer to men as ‘boys’.

Gender identity, expression and fluidity

Gender identity and gender expression are two different things. Gender expression is how somebody outwardly presents themselves to the world. Their gender identity may or may not match this. Sharing your own pronouns helps to create a safe space for people to be themselves. In an online meeting, some people share their pronouns after their name:

For example:
Gemma Hyde. She/her ***OR***
Jay Walker. They/them

You could also share your own pronouns in conversation. However, nobody should feel under pressure to do so.

For example:
“Hello, my name is Robyn and my pronouns are she/her. Nice to meet you.”

Currently titles are highly gendered and it should be recognised that some people aren’t comfortable with this mode of address. People should be empowered to choose how they would like to be addressed, and not feel under pressure to use a title that reveals their marital status or gender if they don’t wish to.

For example:
People of different genders may choose to use a gender-neutral title such as Mx, or women may prefer to be addressed as Ms rather than Mrs or Miss.

Non-binary people

Many cultures have traditionally held the view of gender as binary: as male or female, he or she. For individuals who identify as non-binary, their gender identity may be more fluid because they do not identify as either male or female.

Therefore, using a person's chosen pronouns is helpful as it honours their identity and humanity. Some people who are non-binary choose to use 'they/them', or something else, such as ze/hir or co/cos, while others may be open to any pronoun. Again, it's important to establish how they would like to be addressed.

When addressing a more general audience, it's helpful to remember that some of the people you are speaking to may identify as non-binary. Language such as 'brothers and sisters', while intended to be inclusive and friendly, doesn't take into account our non-binary friends. You might consider using 'siblings', 'friends' or 'children of God' instead. Similarly, using 'he or she' could be exclusive; 'they' is also accurate and acceptable.

If you are referring to a particular non-binary individual, remember that 'they' is acceptable as a singular pronoun. If this needs to be spelled out the first time you refer to them in copy, for clarity, this is fine – do so and then consistently use the chosen pronoun.

For example:
Tyler, who identifies as non-binary, and uses the pronouns they/them, has lived in Manchester for five years.
Later on: *"Since they were tiny, Tyler and their brother played instruments and sang in their church band."*

It's likely that we will make mistakes when trying out language that is new to us and, while it may feel awkward, it will be appreciated by the person we are speaking to/about. Try to be gracious if you are corrected and follow the person's lead in terms of how they would like to be addressed or referred to.

Transgender people

Transgender, or trans for short, means somebody is now living with a gender identity and/or expression that they were not born with, and may have changed the pronouns they wish to use. This should be respected.

Transgender is an adjective, so therefore: "Lee is transgender" NOT "Lee is transgendered." No suffix is needed.

Furthermore, when referring to a transgender person, a space is required, but no hyphen, ie trans woman and trans man.

Orders of Ministry

There are two orders of ministry within the Methodist Church in Britain: deacons and presbyters. The term 'minister' refers to both orders. The terms 'deacon' and 'presbyter' can be used to refer to them separately where required. Phrases such as 'ministers and deacons' or 'deacons and ordinary ministers' should be avoided.

Sexuality: LGBT+ individuals

It is important that the Church uses language that is inclusive of LGBT+[1] people. Be guided by individuals and how they wish to refer to themselves and their families.

For example:
If Gary refers to Mike as his 'husband', do so in general conversation and – if relevant – when writing to or about him.
If Gary and Mike prefer to be referred to as 'partners' then do so.

Using the language that individuals use for themselves shows that we care as a Church and that we affirm them as a child of God.

It might also help to bear in mind that there may be people in church who have not 'come out' and who would therefore not comment on non-inclusive language due to their personal choice not to share their sexuality openly, but who nonetheless may feel excluded by language that isn't inclusive of them.

Queer identity

The word 'queer' and its meaning has evolved over the years. It is commonly known, even in the recent past, as an offensive term for homosexual. In recent years it has been claimed by some LGBT+ people to express their sexuality positively. It shouldn't be used about someone without their permission, but is acceptable if this is how they self-identify.

Slavery

Slavery did not end with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Modern-day slavery is often the result of exploitation of people who are desperate and vulnerable. It is a very complex crime that takes many different forms globally. Human trafficking is a part of this problem but shouldn't be conflated with modern-day slavery. It has its own legal definition.

[1] In this document we are using LGBT+ recognising that the + sign refers to many differing experiences of life, too many to mention individually. This is a reminder that we are all unique.

Currently, in relation to this topic, the Methodist Church is using the language of the Memorial (M22) to the 2021 Methodist Conference to refer to the focus of this work (ie 'transatlantic slave trade') and aiming to use 'enslaved people/Africans' consistently to describe those subjected to that practice. However, we recognise that in such contexts the terminology is never uncontroversial and opinions will vary on how enslaved people, their trafficking and their enslavers should be identified and we will be discussing further the developing and preferred terminology, as we consult on our Church's response.

Language to consider using:
Enslaved people, or people who were held captive, **not** slaves
Using 'enslaved' (an adjective) rather than 'slave' (a noun) separates the condition of being enslaved from the status of 'being' a slave. Being a slave is not the essence of a person's being; they were enslaved by others.

Trauma and Abuse

It should be noted once again, that the intention of this document is not to prohibit uses of particular words, however it is vital to consider the backgrounds and potential experiences of your audience or readers in order to be pastorally sensitive to those in your midst. Bear in mind that people who have experienced abuse and trauma are at risk of being triggered by many different things, including language. If you know you are producing printed or digital copy for an audience that may include survivors of trauma, it could be relevant to think of language in terms of being trauma-informed. This means recognising that it is worth attempting to avoid re-triggering those in recovery by the considerate use of language.

Although, to many of us, language that describes such things as being 'encircled' or 'embraced' (for example, 'embraced by God's love') is a beautiful and comforting image, some of these words may be triggering to people who have experienced intimate abuse. You could consider more neutral alternatives such as 'surrounded by'. In a church context this may mean considering how people feel about sharing the peace.

Those who have been through abuse have different opinions on how they may like to be referred to. It used to be commonplace to refer to 'victims' of abuse. Now it is generally more acceptable to say 'survivor'. Some people like the term 'survivor', others do not. 'Those who have experienced abuse' is a neutral term that can be used. However, the best advice is to consult with those who may know your audience and/or be open and sensitive to the need to change this terminology based on their feedback.

However…

It is also worth considering whether there is any need to refer to any aspect of a person's identity that isn't directly relevant to the conversation or communication you are taking part in. Sometimes the most inclusive way of speaking or writing about people is not to emphasise an aspect of their identity.

Even today it's commonplace for tabloid papers, for example, to introduce everyone by way of their marital/parental status and age… "Married mother-of-three Naomi, 38, from Huddersfield, said…" or to make reference to the ethnicity or religion of a criminal or suspect when it isn't relevant to the story and indeed might even influence the views of the reader.

Where it isn't relevant, you don't need to reference any kind of 'status' or current or past struggles that people might have had. This keeps the emphasis on our common humanity and our common identity as beloved of God.

And finally…

There is no definitive guide to 'inclusive language'. Language, by its very nature, is constantly evolving. This guide is just a starting point, to get us talking, thinking, and sharing. If you're reading this and feel that somebody or a group of people have been left out, get in touch to let us know and we'll edit this guide to include them. We will update it annually.

Similarly, if you would like to challenge any of the content of this guide do let us know because our language and understanding will develop as we continue in conversation together. You can email equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk or publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk

Organisations and resources that may help

This section contains links to lots of resources for further individual learning about a wide range of topics. All of them have been recommended to the Methodist Church by people with experience in the relevant field. Not all of these external resources will always share a Methodist ethos or theology. However, that does not mean we cannot learn more about equality, diversity and inclusion issues from reading these resources.

If you find anything in these resources that you consider inappropriate, please reflect on what learning you can take from the resource and why other Methodists might have recommended it. Please also contact **publishing@methodisthchurch.org.uk** to report the resource so it can be reviewed and removed from this list if necessary.

ADHD Aware adhdaware.org.uk
All about Trans allabouttrans.org.uk
Arise arisefdn.org
Conscious kid, **The** theconsciouskid.org
Council of Christians and Jews ccj.org.uk/about-us
Dyslexia Association, The dyslexia.uk.net
GLAAD glaad.org/reference
International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) holocaustremembrance.com
Prospect 'Why is language so important in disability and neurodiversity?' available from prospect.org.uk/article/why-is-language-important-in-disability-and-neurodiversity/ [accessed 24/4/2024]
Stonewall stonewall.org.uk
Racial Equity Tools racialequitytools.org/glossary
Rise: Freedom from Abuse and Violence riseuk.org.uk