Contact Name and Details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	41/1. The Conference receives the Report. 41/2. The Conference adopts the principles set out in section 7 and directs the Faith and Order Committee to follow them in drafting and revising liturgical resources. 41/3. The Conference encourages all Methodist preachers and leaders of worship to study this report and to reflect on the language and imagery used in the worship they lead.

Summary of Content and Impact

Subject and Aims	To offer principles to guide the work of liturgical writing and revision
Main Points	Introduction Language for God: describing the indescribable The Bible and the language of worship A vision for language in worship Specific areas of discussion and consideration • Range of language • Gendered language for God and people • The Holy Trinity • Light and darkness • Dis/ability • Power and control • Sin and forgiveness • Violence Ecumenical and common texts Principles for the Conference to adopt Suggestions for preachers and leaders of worship
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	Inclusive Language and Imagery for God, 1992 Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity, 2021 The Theology of Safeguarding, 2021 Revising *The Methodist Worship Book*, 2025 Healing Ministry and Neurodiversity, 2025

Principles for Liturgical Style and Language

1. Introduction

1.1 The 2025 Conference adopted the proposal to revise *The Methodist Worship Book*.[1] In doing so, it agreed that this would be done by means of a rolling programme of replacing and/or revising existing authorised liturgy. Such a rolling programme requires that there be some agreed principles regarding liturgical style and language, in order that there is a consistent approach to subsequent liturgical writing and revision. This report seeks to set out these principles in order to guide this work.

1.2 In considering principles for liturgical style and language, this work builds on previous reports and decisions of the Conference, including:

- Inclusive Language and Imagery for God, 1992[2]
- Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity, 2021[3]
- The Theology of Safeguarding, 2021[4]
- Healing Ministry and Neurodiversity, 2025[5]

In addition, in 2024, the Inclusive Language Guide[6] was published.

1.3 Authorisation of liturgy in the Methodist Church is a significant process, requiring authorisation by the Conference following a period of experimental use. At present, the authorised liturgies of the Church are those contained within *The Methodist Worship Book*, as amended or added to by any subsequent decisions of the Conference. It has not been the Conference's custom to deauthorise any superseded liturgies, and this question is to be considered separately by the Faith and Order Committee.[7] There is no requirement for authorised liturgy to be used in Methodist worship but it represents a statement of Methodist teaching and belief as well as providing an example of best practice. While authorised resources

1 Resolution 32/2, 2025 Conference. See https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/32._Revising_the_Methodist_Worship_Book.pdf
2 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-inclusive-language-1992_9ff7Bi6.pdf
3 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2021-56-strategy-for-justice-dignity-and-solidarity-working-towards-a-ful_CaeKrNH.pdf
4 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2021-27-the-theology-of-safeguarding_NsSFKxd.pdf
5 https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/16._Healing_Ministry_and_Neurodiversity.pdf
6 https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/the-inclusive-methodist-church/resources-events-and-support/resources/the-methodist-inclusive-language-guide/
7 Resolution 32/4, 2025 Conference

are only one small part of the picture of what makes up Methodist worship, the aspiration of this report is that this work might encourage all who share in leading worship in any way to reflect on the questions considered here. This report itself provides a resource for such reflection. It needs to be remembered that the words on the page or screen are only one part of what is communicated through an act of worship: the way in which we speak and listen as well as the wider setting of atmosphere and context all contribute to the overall 'message' of the worship.

2. Language for God: describing the indescribable

2.1 There is a creative tension inherent in seeking language to use for God, whether liturgically, academically or in any other way. God is always beyond human description or comprehension and any way in which we seek to speak of God will always fall short of the full reality of God's being. For some Christians, prayer transcends language entirely. At the same time, Christians believe that God has revealed Godself and wants to be known. God calls us into relationship. Through God's self revelation – to Moses at the burning bush, through the voices of the prophets, in the continuing experience of the Church, and supremely in Jesus Christ – we can say with confidence that there are things we know of God.

2.2 The language used for God in worship (as well as in other contexts) needs to reflect this. It needs to be appropriately humble in recognising that God cannot be contained nor can it ever be imagined that all has been said that can be said. Alongside this, it must also be faithful to what the Scriptures reveal of God, the Church's tradition and the continued work of the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. Christians through the ages have sought to discover more of God and to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's being.

2.3 Janet Soskice in her book *Naming God*[8] explores the long tradition of addressing the divine. Soskice argues that the biblical tradition gives us rich range of divine names and furthermore a tradition of naming the divine that can yet continue. She claims:

> Naming God calls us back to the practice of *theologia* where *theologia* is not so much knowledge about God as knowledge of God, through contemplation, prayer and above all praise. […] Naming God is indeed about knowing God but knowing too in the sense of 'being in relation to God', for what is vital to the believer is not to know a great deal about God but to be in loving relation to God.[9]

8 Soskice, Janet, *Naming God*, Cambridge University Press 2023
9 *Naming God*, pp. 6-7

2.4 It is this that is at the heart of the task here: to seek to name God in worship in such a way that worshippers are able to contemplate, to pray, and to praise and to be drawn more deeply into loving relationship with God. The scriptures, and the tradition of the wider Church and of Methodism, provide deep wells on which to draw for this while at the same time the needs of the present age require building upon those foundations to speak of God in ways that resonate today.

2.5 The early Methodist tradition sought to express faith in terms which enabled all with whom it engaged to learn of God and to praise God. John Wesley thought highly of the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*[10] (and used it as the basis for the Sunday Service for the use of Methodists in North America) yet also came to realise the importance of extempore prayer in addressing the needs of the moment. The hymnody of Charles Wesley similarly gave voice to the Methodists' contemplation, prayer and praise: drawing deeply on the language of the scriptures (to such an extent that many of his references are often missed today) and providing words that early Methodists could learn and own. The tradition of 'singing our theology' remains an important aspect of Methodist worship.

2.6 This succession sets the context for the current work of revising the Methodist Church's authorised liturgy. The riches of the scriptures and the Church's traditions alongside the mission to which God has called the Methodist people today deeply inform this consideration of the language to be used in worship.

2.7 One of the significant features of the present context is a deeper awareness of the ways in which the Church's liturgical language can contribute to exclusion and discrimination. While the Methodist Church's inheritance in liturgy brings many riches, it also brings with it a cultural and linguistic worldview which needs to be examined and critiqued: particularly because of how embedded images such as king/empire and a light/darkness binary are within it.[11] Through the *Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity* (JDS), the Methodist Church has committed itself to becoming a church in which all are able to play their part fully. The way in which language for God and for one another is used in worship is part of this. Mary Daly famously observed "If God is male, then male is God."[12] If the language used images God in ways that relate to some people and not to others then there are

10 "I believe there is no liturgy in the world, either in ancient or modern language, which breathes more of a solid, scriptural, rational piety, than the Common Prayer of the Church of England. And though the main of it was compiled considerably more than two hundred years ago, yet is the language of it, not only pure, but strong and elegant in the highest degree." from Wesley, John, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists*, p. A2, available from https://wesleyscholar.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/JW-The-Sunday-Service-of-Methodists-1788.pdf

11 See Jagessar and Burns, p. 22

12 Daly, Mary *Beyond God the Father: toward a philosophy of women's liberation*, 1973

inevitable implications about how God relates to some people and not others. This is a question to be attended to across the full breadth of JDS concerns: if the Methodist Church is committed to recognising that all people bear the image of God, how is that reflected in the images liturgical language uses for God?

2.8 Ultimately, the Church's commission to proclaim the good news of Jesus requires speaking of God and of the hope that comes from God. Taken together, this leads to a response to the limitations of any particular name by an *expansive* approach in which God is named in multiple ways and in which the language of the ages is used alongside new forms and expressions, seeking a wide and diverse range of images rooted in Scripture, the church's tradition and human experience.

3. The Bible and the language of worship

3.1 Throughout Christian history, one important source – perhaps the most important – of language for prayer, including in the way that God is addressed, has of course been Scripture. The Bible gives models of prayer to imitate or adapt. It offers examples of people praying. It gives reflections and teachings about prayer. The Hebrew Bible is a rich source of prayers, which generations of Jews and Christians have incorporated into their own prayer life, as individuals and as worshipping communities. The Psalms, in particular, offer prayers to fit all moods, from celebration to despair, and from gratitude to anger. They also give a verse often used as the basis of a prayer before preaching a sermon: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."[13] Another well-known example is the so-called 'priestly blessing' or 'Aaronic blessing'[14], by which God, through Moses, instructs Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

3.2 In the New Testament, too, there are examples of prayers Christians have long used. Among the most well-known is the closing verse of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."[15] But undoubtedly the most famous of the New Testament prayers is 'the prayer that Jesus taught us', often known as 'the Lord's prayer',[16] which has become part of the liturgy of almost

13 Psalm 19:14
14 Numbers 6:24–26
15 2 Corinthians 3:13; the Greek could equally read, "…**is** with all of you."
16 Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4

every Christian denomination and tradition.[17] This prayer serves in two ways. Firstly, it provides a form of words which are shared by Christians everywhere, uniting people across cultural and linguistic divides, and across time. Secondly, it forms a part of Jesus' teaching about prayer, giving guidelines for what good prayer can look like. This sits alongside the example given of Jesus' own prayer life, in which he takes time out to pray,[18] and prays for his followers[19] and for himself – sometimes in desperation.[20]

3.3 One important way in which the Bible can inform the language of prayers is in the way in which God is addressed or described. This is not a simple or uniform picture. God is described variously as Father,[21] a mother hen,[22] Lord of hosts,[23] Almighty,[24] and husband,[25] among other titles. Most consistently used, at least in the Hebrew Bible, are two terms: Elohim and YHWH. The first of these is generally translated 'God', at least when used to refer to the God of Israel. However, it is plural in form and is also often used to mean more generally 'gods', or even 'heavenly beings'. It may be for this reason that certain strands of Hebrew scripture prefer the name that is claimed by God, YHWH, or Yahweh. It means something like 'I am', or 'I will be'. Later, it began to be revered as so holy that a devout Jew would not pronounce it. When Scripture is read in Hebrew, it became customary to speak the word Adonai (Lord), whenever the name appeared in the text. In most English translations, therefore, YHWH is translated 'LORD', usually fully capitalised.[26] This emphasises something of the complexity of addressing God, who at times is spoken to with the intimacy of a parent, and at other times is addressed in ways which see God as too holy to be called by name. Other ways of addressing God, of course, are drawn from the divine roles seen in Scripture, such as Creator or Saviour, or by divine attributes, such as loving, gracious or compassionate God. Jesus calls God 'Father', and this has led some to favour that form of address, but this is made even more complicated by the fact that Jesus himself came to be worshipped as God. Christians pray not only to the

17 The customary conclusion in many traditions, "For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever," is not original to the Gospel texts.
18 For example, Mark 1:35
19 For example, John 17
20 For example, Mark 14:36; 15:34 – in which he prays in the words of Psalm 22.
21 For example, Matthew 11:25, John 17:1
22 For example, Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34
23 For example, 1 Samuel 1:3, James 5:4
24 For example, Numbers 24:4, Job 5:17
25 For example, Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 3:14
26 There is further consideration of gendered forms of address for God in paragraph 5.2 and of how YHWH might be rendered in paragraph 5.6 but it should be noted here that replacing YHWH with Adonai and translating it LORD replaces a gender-neutral name with a male title.

Father, but also to the one who called God 'Father', and forms of address to Jesus might include the name, Jesus, or the title, Christ (or Messiah). Equally, following his early disciples, Christians might call him friend, teacher or Lord.[27] Furthermore, Christians pray in, through and to the Holy Spirit, often as invocation 'come, Holy Spirit'. Most formally, Christian prayer is offered to God through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

3.4 One thing which becomes clear in any careful biblical analysis is that there is enormous diversity in the way in which God is referenced and addressed. This is only to be expected: the texts that make up the Bible do, after all, span many centuries and therefore a range of cultures and contexts. It shows diversity and development in its theology and in its understanding of the relationship between humanity and God. Even within one book, this may be true. The Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) is commonly seen as weaving together sources written from within different Israelite traditions, some of which routinely refer to God as Elohim, and others of which use the divine Name. The book of Job, too, is a good example of very different theologies brought together (perhaps over time) into one text, with the narrative beginning and ending seeming very different from the God of the main, poetic section. The context in which Jesus lived and ministered is different again, in another era and another phase of the life of God's people. The accounts and letters of the early Church, spreading across a large swathe of the Roman Empire, introduce still another contextual variation. It is only to be expected that the nature of the relationship between God and God's people would be understood in different, often very contextualised ways, at different times and in different circumstances. A people seeking God's protection, comfort or forgiveness, or experiencing God's grace or challenge, will naturally shape the way in which that people speaks of God. In turn, the names by which God is addressed will also be shaped by culture and circumstances.

4. A vision for language in worship

4.1 This report seeks to offer a positive vision for the language that is to be used in worship and liturgy. It is at one level easy to point to examples of what one does not like or find helpful. However, the hope in setting out some sense of vision is that this can support framing positive principles which will guide writing and revision. The following points are proposed:

27 Further consideration about the title 'Lord' is found below in paragraph 5.6

- Hopeful and positive – draws people into worship
- Poetic and inspiring – language which has beauty and simplicity, uses poetic techniques such as alliteration, metaphor, patterns of words (as, for example, in the tradition of Charles Wesley) that will not feel dated in a few years
- Language that highlights that all people matter ultimately to God – reflects our Arminian tradition
- Open language for God – expands rather than limits our understanding of God
- Language that draws people deeper – that invites returning to it regularly, so it becomes part of spirituality and a journey deeper into the mystery of God
- Faithful, doctrinal, teaching texts – rooted within the broad Christian tradition, especially Methodist theological understandings, includes texts which Christians have found meaningful over centuries
- Accessible, easy to understand, simple – speaks in direct ways using authentic speech patterns and cadences, knows when fewer words are enough
- Inclusive – in ways in which as many people as possible feel engaged with, uses biblical, traditional and contemporary sources and imagery
- Respectful – recognises that different experiences, ages and viewpoints can have a place in worship, knows when to be silent and when to speak
- Spirit-filled – bringing life and energy
- Expressing the (full) range of human emotion – joy and sorrow, hope and disappointment, comfort and challenge, being honest before God without pretence, following the tradition of the psalms.

5 Specific areas of discussion and consideration

There are specific areas that need particular attention and where recommendations need to be made.

5.1 **Range of language**

5.1.1 Since the resources will be used in a wide variety of contexts, they will need to take account of a range of needs and abilities including age, neurodiversity, literacy. The emphasis here is on accessibility, recognising that this can mean different things in different places. Whilst it is impossible to respond to every need, it is recommended that there is attentiveness to providing resources using a range of types of language rather than a single model. Poetic language can be accessible for some across a wide age range, while others need language that is more literal. It might be that different resources are produced in different styles and that certain liturgies are provided where alternatives can be offered in different registers. It is noted that, for example, 'An additional order for the

baptism of young children'[28] has already been produced which was intentionally written in simpler language.

5.2 **Gendered language for God and people**

5.2.1 The 1992 Conference report *Inclusive Language and Imagery for God* committed the Methodist Church to a more diverse language with regard to God and gender, although by and large its recommendations have remained unimplemented. The vast majority of the language for God in *The Methodist Worship Book* is male and anecdotally the same is true for Methodist worship in general. As stated in 2.7, this can imply something that is counter to the intent of the *Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity*. Changing to gender-neutral forms of language for the majority of liturgies could be a helpful first step. It is important to continue to represent the feminine and to have some liturgies that use a range of gendered language for God: she/he/they.[29] Where gendered language is used, attention should be paid to the ways in which this may risk reinforcing stereotypes of the feminine as 'nurturing' and 'caring' and the masculine as 'strong' and 'powerful'.

5.2.2 Brian Wren in 1989 observed that:

> Male dominance is a theological problem because God creates us in two coequal genders and does not intend that one should subordinate the other. A civilization built on male dominance and female subordination is a profound distortion and sin, but not immutable. It has arisen in our prehistory and history, so can change and be superseded.[30]

5.2.3 Elizabeth Johnson, in her work *She Who Is*, argued that being able to speak of God in female terms was essential to a full understanding of God. To speak of God in this way is not to replace the male but to add to the picture something of that which is missing:

> The mystery of God transcends all images but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female reality. The approach advocated here proceeds with the insight that only if God is so named, only if the full reality of women as well as men enters into

28 Available from: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/additional-order-for-the-baptism-of-young-children-0618.pdf

29 It could be noted that in Hebrew the word for Spirit is grammatically feminine. In Greek it is neuter and in Latin it is masculine.

30 Wren, Brian, *What Language shall I borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*, 1989 SCM Press, page 4

> the symbolization of God along with symbols from the natural world, can the idolatrous fixation on one image be broken and the truth of the mystery of God, in tandem with the liberation of all human beings and the whole earth, emerge for our time.[31]

5.2.4 Since those writings, understandings have developed yet further and an account of gender that goes beyond 'two coequal genders' is increasingly recognised. For example, Justin Sabia-Tanis highlights the importance of not limiting God by human categories of gender:

> …if the Divine has room for the trinity, there is room for at least two genders; if Jesus can be both human and divine, surely the Holy One can be broader than human categories of sex and gender. The patriarchal system in which we live, however, sets the gender of God as surely as it creates a bigendered social order.[32]

5.2.5 The way in which gendered language is used of God and people in liturgy forms, and will continue to form, the ways in which people generally and Methodists in particular think of God and one another. Careful attention to how gendered language and imagery is used will allow a deeper understanding and experience of God and fulfil more clearly the aims of the Conference in adopting the *Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity*.

5.2.6 Questions relating to gender intersect with other questions especially around the use of personal language. Familial images are helpful in expressing the personal nature of relationship with God but can also be problematic, especially for those with experience of abuse in family contexts. This can be particularly true for parental language. Using a predominance of father language for God can also risk reinforcing unhelpful narratives of patriarchal society. Personal and relational language is nevertheless important in ensuring that God is not represented only in abstract ways.

5.2.7 The revised services for marriage used the pronouns she/he/they routinely in rubrics to refer to participants in the service and variable texts and it is recommended that this be adopted as standard practice.

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31 Johnson, Elizabeth A., *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 2002, Herder & Herder, page 56

32 Sabia-Tanis, Justin, *Trans-gender: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith* (2nd ed.), 2018, Wipf & Stock, page 135

5.3 **The Holy Trinity**

5.3.1 The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most significant in Christianity and is interwoven with a proper understanding of other significant doctrines such as the incarnation and the atonement. Understanding God as Trinity is closely related to understanding the nature of Christ and consequently the work of salvation. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the cornerstones of orthodox Christianity and a fundamental component of the communion (even where impaired) the Methodist Church shares with Churches and Christians throughout the world. The way in which Trinitarian language is used in Methodist liturgy is thus of vital importance in a number of ways. This consideration is not simply about what language is used to reference the Trinity explicitly but about the fact that Christian liturgy as a whole should have a Trinitarian shape. The Church offers its worship to the Source of all Being, through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

5.3.2 At the same time, Trinitarian language is currently overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, male. Naming the Holy Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit remains essential as part of Methodist witness to the 'fundamental principles of the apostolic faith' and is critical to the common ecumenical recognition of baptism. However, it is also important to use other ways of naming the Trinity which are not so male dominated. A gender neutral example is already used in *The Methodist Worship Book*, "Source of all Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit."[33]

5.3.3. Commonly-used gender neutral formulations can raise other theological problems. For example, the phrase 'Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer' obscures the principle of 'unity of operations': the Christian belief that the persons of the Trinity act together in creation, redemption and sustenance. It is God the Holy Trinity who creates, redeems and sustains. Each is an important descriptor of God, but they do not identify the persons of the Trinity.

5.3.4 An important theological aspect of naming the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is in identifying the relations between the persons. The Father is the source of all that is, the Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.[34] Other ways to name the Trinity that invoke the Trinity's

33 *The Methodist Worship Book*, p. 29

34 The version of the Nicene Creed used in the majority of the Western Church confesses belief in the double procession of the Holy Spirit: that is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Orthodox Churches hold only to the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father. The Conference has previously expressed "its willingness to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by East and West in A.D. 381, if and when, in the judgement of the Conference, there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church." *The Filioque Clause*, 1990, available from: https://www.methodist.org.uk/documents/8023/fo-statement-the-filioque-clause-1990_XFgIlge.pdf

relationality and that are not gendered male are also important. It is an aim of the ongoing work of liturgical revision to identify suitable forms, for example 'Lover, Beloved, Love' (c.f. Augustine's understanding of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the first and second persons of the Trinity).

5.3.5 The foreword to the revised version of *Worship from the United Reformed Church* observes:

> Prayers using traditional Trinitarian language have not been excluded, but the URC's resolution to expand language has been honoured. No language, when used of God, can be either literal or adequate, for all is metaphor and glimpse. But God gives us the sources of tradition, our mother tongue of the Scriptures, and the wells of our imagination with which to pray, praise and bless.[35]

It is recommended that the Methodist Church adopt a similar approach.

5.4 Light and darkness

5.4.1 Much of the Christian liturgical tradition, echoing the language of some of the Scriptures, makes significant use of the imagery of light and darkness, attaching positive connotations to light and negative connotations to darkness. A number of Black theologians and post-colonial scholars[36] challenge this as embedding anti-Blackness and racial prejudice in the language of the liturgy itself. In *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns explore this through reflecting on a particular service which took 'Let our Light Shine' as its theme. They note the dangers of perpetuating racism when the colour black is used negatively and white positively, and that 'these associations arise from European interpretations of the Bible's use of light and darkness imagery.'[37] It is important not to use such images uncritically and to be attentive to positive images of darkness and negative ones of light, which are also in Scripture. In the wider tradition of the Church, there is rich theological reflection on divine darkness[38] which could also provide helpful approaches in diversifying the use

35 *Foreword to Worship from the United Reformed Church*, available from: https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Worship_book_-2026-Foreword.pdf

36 See for example, Jagessar, M N, and Burns, Stephen, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, 2011, Barton, Mukti, *I am Black and Beautiful (Black Theology: An International Journal) 2.2, 2004,* Faccini, SC, *Concepts of Darkness and Light in Church of England Advent Liturgy: Examining Anti-Blackness in the present cultural and liturgical context,* MA dissertation, Sarum College

37 Jagessar, M N, and Burns, Stephen, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, 2011, page 38

38 See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa's treatise on the Life of Moses.

of these images. Faccini's study of Advent liturgy in the Church of England[39] recommended using positive images of the dark such as the womb, the soil and the night as a means of redressing the inherited bias of existing approaches. Language such as 'shadows' and 'gloom' rather than 'darkness' can also be helpful, alongside 'brightness' and 'radiance'. Jagessar and Burns observe:

> 'Detached from the language of light, "bright" and "radiant" imply no particular colour, avoiding dehumanizing associations. Likewise, the language of darkness can be replaced by the more shifting notion of "shadows".'[40]

5.5 Dis/ability

5.5.1 Christianity is a faith centred on the incarnation: the belief that God came to the world in Jesus Christ, who was and is fully divine and fully human. It is therefore only natural that the language of Christian prayer and worship is a bodily language and invokes bodily images. The language of worship is, therefore, both spiritual and physical. However, in the history of liturgy and hymnody, the language that has been used is overwhelmingly about able-bodied persons. Where the language of disability is used, it is generally in a negative sense: a sign of weakness or something to be overcome. For example, in their account of disabled Christians' stories of churches and Christianity, Naomi Lawson Jacobs and Emily Richardson observe:

> Norms of *seeing* and *hearing* have power in churches. Gospel stories of the healing of blind and deaf people are read in churches almost every Sunday. Blind and deaf theologians have written about church *audiocentricity* (which centres those with hearing privilege) and *visiocentricity* (which centres those with sighted privilege). For blind theologian John Hull, the words of hymns and prayers, and even the metaphors of the Bible itself, can privilege a sighted perspective. It can reinforce our ableist thinking, when threaded through church cultures, our holy and liturgical texts associate blindness with ignorance or sin: "When we refer to these qualities as being *spiritual blindness* we reinforce the prejudice, and collaborate in the continued marginalization of disabled people."[41]

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39 Faccini, SC, *Concepts of Darkness and Light in Church of England Advent Liturgy: Examining Anti-Blackness in the present cultural and liturgical context,* MA dissertation, Sarum College
40 Jagessar, M N, and Burns, Stephen, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, 2011, page 41
41 Jacobs, N L and Richardson E, *At the Gates: Disability, Justice and the Churches*, 2022, Darton, Longman and Todd, page 67

The exact issue they identify is present in the current text of *The Methodist Worship Book* which includes a prayer asking God for 'those good things which we dare not or in our blindness cannot ask'.[42] Similar points could be made in relation to other disabilities. Reading the scriptures and writing liturgical texts from a 21st century context with advanced health-care, it may be easy to forget that many of our forebears, including potentially some of the disciples of Jesus, would have lived with what would now be called disability. A non-disabled norm has become more rather than less embedded over the years.

5.5.2 The question can be asked about how liturgical language recognises that disabled people are bearers of the image of God just as non-disabled people are. For example, the use of sensory language in connection with God (eg Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer), may create unhelpful implications as to the relationship between God and disabled people. While the phrase 'hear our prayer' is generally understood to mean 'please receive' rather than intending it to mean 'God is hearing', the metaphor is not unimportant. As an alternative, 'receive our prayer' could be used in some contexts and echoes the language of the ancient liturgical hymn *Glory to God in the highest*. In general, it will be important to be attentive in writing to how language about disability and ability is used: What is the language positive or negative about? Who does it include or exclude? Who does it make more like God or less like God?

5.5.3 Going further, Jacobs and Richardson highlight the theological importance of disabled images of God:

> Through our own 'frontier theologies', disabled and neurodivergent Christians are daring to imagine more and more images of a God like us, in a prism of fragmented Light, a rainbow as diverse and unique as we each are […]. This is a God who is with us in all our experiences, from pain to paranoia, in the lives of people whose bodies, minds and experiences give us distinctive insights into compassion, lament and being human. This is a God who becomes one of the marginalised, and announces the upside-down Reign of God, in which we will all be liberated from the power of sin in the world. These diverse images of a disabled God are powerful for disabled people, who need a God we can identify with, and who can identify with us. This disabled God could be powerful for non-disabled people too. A disabled God can speak to non-disabled people about (in)justice, diversity (or the lack of it) in the Church, and the urgency of valuing all bodies and minds in a world that

42 *The Methodist Worship Book*, page 49

> does not. Non-disabled people need to gaze on a disabled Christ, and not turn away, asking what God's wounded, monstrous body means for their exclusion of disabled people, and for their relationship with their own fragile, human bodies.[43]

5.5.4 The subject of healing is particularly sensitive in the context of disability and neurodivergence. The recent report on *Healing Ministry and Neurodiversity*[44] recognised the breadth of this subject. As that report states in paragraph 2.2.7 it is important to be careful about talking about healing in relation to disability and neurodiversity. In considering the language used in our authorised liturgy, appropriate attention will need to be paid to this.

5.5.5 As with many other communities, disabled people have a wide variety of perspectives and what is helpful for one may be unhelpful for another. There will be no single 'correct' language but in the writing of liturgy it is important to be attentive to the theologies and images of God that are being invoked and to consider their relation to disabled and non-disabled people.

5.6 Power and control

5.6.1 Traditional Christian liturgical language makes frequent use of images of power and control in relation to God. It is familiar to most Christians to use addresses such as 'King', 'Lord', 'Almighty' and so on for God. Indeed, this language is found throughout the Scriptures. Power language is often also male language. Such language has been challenged in relation to the image of God it presents and the question can legitimately be raised as to the overall image of God our language – taken together – creates and whether that is true to the Scriptures and to Christian experience as a whole. The practice of rendering the divine name (YHWH) as 'the Lord' in most English translations of the Hebrew scriptures means that the versions frequently used make this language even more prominent than it is in the original texts. As noted above, YHWH derives from the verb 'to be': how might images of God change and develop were YHWH rendered as "The One who is," "I AM" or something similar?

5.6.2 For the early Christians, 'Jesus is Lord' was arguably the first creed. To affirm the Lordship of Christ was to reject, or at least to relativise, the power claims of earthly rulers: at its most stark, 'If Jesus is Lord, Caesar isn't.' More recent post-

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43 Jacobs, N L and Richardson E, *At the Gates: Disability, Justice and the Churches*, 2022, Darton, Longman and Todd, page 157

44 *Healing Ministry and Neurodiversity*, paragraph 1.1.3. Available from: https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/16._Healing_Ministry_and_Neurodiversity.pdf

colonial and feminist treatments of this recognise the subversive potential of the affirmation of Christ's rule in the face of oppressive and patriarchal earthly rulers and structures. While Gail Ramshaw in *Liturgical Language: Keeping it Metaphoric, Making it Inclusive* suggests some nongender specific replacements for king, such as 'sovereign' and 'monarch',[45] the difficulties of this language from a postcolonial perspective are addressed by Jagessar and Burns:

> These may be non-gendered, but they still smack of the language of "empire", power and "domination" – even though it is God's. The fundamental question from a postcolonial reading is what actually remains unquestioned: the underlying assumption of superiority or privilege that is assumed by one group or nation under the guise of working on behalf of the reign of this monarch.[46]

5.6.3 Liturgical writing cannot avoid questions of power and images of power will still be appropriate within an overall range of liturgical language. However, in writing and revising texts there are questions to be asked about the range of images: in what ways are the gentleness, humility and vulnerability of God portrayed? There are also questions to be asked about how humanity, and particularly privileged humanity, is situated in relation to the power of God: do images of God's power challenge or reinforce earthly power structures?

5.7 Sin and Forgiveness

5.7.1. The notion of 'sin' can be a difficult concept to communicate in today's world, not least because of the dual pitfalls of trivialising it or equating it only with horrendous evil. This has the result that the Christian understanding that the capacity for sin is part of the human condition can require some explaining. Furthermore, while all people are sinners who stand in need of God's forgiveness and renewal, we are also all people who have, to a greater or lesser extent, been sinned against. God bringing healing and freedom from shame (which can be a consequence of the ways in which others have sinned against us) is an underexplored one in previous authorised liturgies. Understood as the capacity for fracturing relationships, sin is also a dynamic which goes beyond the personal and interpersonal; it impacts on institutions and the individuals within them and can be structural as it also operates at the macro levels of society and government. A concrete example of this is the evil of discrimination in its many forms (for

45 Ramshaw, Gail, *Liturgical Language: Keeping it Metaphoric, Making it Inclusive* (1996), page 29
46 Jagessar, M N, and Burns, Stephen, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, 2011, pages 43-44

example, racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, and so on), which is found not only in our individual actions but also within the structural levels of our society.

5.7.2 The subject of forgiveness can also be challenging, sensitive and emotive, and as such it requires careful handling. This is compounded by misunderstandings about what it does and does not mean both to forgive and to be forgiven. In particular, much harm has been done by using the language of forgiveness of sins to pressure people who have experienced abuse to forgive their abuser(s). In *The Theology of Safeguarding*, it is noted that forgiveness "has become a complex and contentious area of theology in the light of the experience of many people who have experienced abuse who have been told to forgive their abusers. That, in itself, has been found to be coercive and abusive, compounded when people who have experienced abuse have been told to do so for their own well-being".[47] Texts such as the Lord's Prayer have been used in this way, implying that God's forgiveness will be withheld if the person is unable to forgive their abuser(s).

5.7.3 In light of this, some principles for handling these themes well, drawn from *The Theology of Safeguarding* and other theological reflections, are:

- All human beings are sinners, in that we think, speak and act in ways which do not reflect the value God places upon all people without exception, and thus that damage relationships. As such, we all need God's forgiveness and to be led by the Holy Spirit into change and growth (ie sanctification).
- All human beings will have, to a greater or lesser extent, experienced harm as a result of the sins of other people. This may be because of the behaviour of individuals, institutions and/or social structures. As such, all human beings are sinned against, as well as sinners.
- God's bringing about of the possibility of redemption through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ encompasses the range of dimensions of sin: forgiveness and healing, reconciliation with God and one another, wholeness and the reintegration of the self, social justice and societal transformation.
- Forgiveness is rarely a one-off event, but is more usually a process which takes time and does not have a guaranteed outcome.
- Forgiveness is not something into which anyone should be pressured or forced, especially those who have experienced abuse, and language implying that God's love for and working in a particular person is conditional upon their forgiving another should be avoided.

47 *The Theology of Safeguarding*, paragraph 8.2

- Forgiveness is not about forgetting what has happened or pretending that harm has not been done, but about truthfulness and the need to take responsibility for one's actions and future behaviour. The story of David being called out by Nathan, after his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, is a helpful case study. As *The Theology of Safeguarding* says, "forgiveness does not mean that previous patterns of behaviour have been left behind, nor does it remove any risk of reoffending."[48]
- In what we say about sin and shame, forgiveness and reconciliation, and in particular about the place of the cross in relation to soteriology, it is important to consider how those at the margins of society and who have experienced abuse and/or oppression might hear the language used.

5.8 Violence

5.8.1 The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is fundamental to the gospel of salvation and the crucifixion is one of the most significant events of Christian faith. Through it, the Church proclaims the good news of forgiveness and the possibility for all humanity to be reconciled with God. At the same time, crucifixion is an extremely violent form of torture and execution. Christian hymnody and liturgy have responded to this in a variety of ways. In some cases, writing revels in gory imagery; in others, a harrowing and traumatic event is almost sanitised; other examples fall somewhere between these extremes.[49] The way in which the Church responds to the violence of the crucifixion can be a significant influence on how it responds to violence in the world today. This has implications for safeguarding, for global politics and for much more.

5.8.2 *The Theology of Safeguarding* noted:

> The Methodist Church has been challenged to examine the language which is used about the cross and to further explore what might be inferred from it about suffering, violence and patterns of Christian discipleship. People who have experienced abuse have found language which emphasises our complicity in Jesus' death to be especially problematic. Such language may be heard in a particularly damaging way by someone who is already feeling the shame and false guilt often associated with abuse or who is being told by the abuser that the hurt

48 *The Theology of Safeguarding*, paragraph 8.4
49 It might be argued that the Gospel accounts also underplay the violence of the crucifixion. However, the first audiences of the Gospels would have been well familiar with what crucifixions entailed.

> they are suffering is all their own fault. The way in which Jesus' suffering on the cross is described and interpreted profoundly impacts on Christian relationships and patterns of relating.[50]

5.8.3 The report went on to explore questions in relation to suffering, and how these are treated theologically and liturgically:

> The idea of bearing suffering as Jesus did, even to death on the cross, is deeply embedded in Christian thinking and patterns of discipleship. Many of those who have experienced abuse in Christian contexts have found that particular notions of obedience and the place of suffering in relation to redemption have contributed to abusive behaviour and the contexts which perpetuate it. In many such accounts of abuse there are examples of how Christian teaching has been used to convey the idea that suffering is necessary for faithful discipleship, and that it is part of God's will and redemptive in itself. Mis-interpretations of the concepts of suffering, obedience and redemption in the light of the gospel have contributed to abusive contexts, and, when invoked by people who abuse, have compounded the trauma of abuse. Some people who have experienced abuse have been told by Christians, and often Church leaders, that they should live with continued abuse or silently bear its consequences as part of their bearing the cross in imitation of Jesus Christ.[51]

5.8.4 Questions relating to suffering particularly arise in connection with the covenant service, where the traditional version of the Covenant prayer includes the line "Put me to suffering". For some these represent an important expression of commitment for God while for others they are in danger of attributing to God the evils that others do to us. Further reflection on this was offered as part of an article on the Methodist website.[52]

5.8.5 While self-denial is a scriptural theme and part of the teaching of Jesus, *The Theology of Safeguarding* gave an important clarification: "Any language of self-denial can only properly be used if there is self-affirmation, self-esteem and the possibility of alternative choices."[53]

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50 *The Theology of Safeguarding*, paragraph 4.6.3
51 *The Theology of Safeguarding*, paragraph 4.6.4
52 *The Covenant Service and Suffering,* https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/the-covenant-service/the-covenant-service-and-suffering/
53 *The Theology of Safeguarding,* paragraph 4.6.10

6. Ecumenical and common texts

6.1 *The Methodist Worship Book* uses the 1998 ELLC (English Language Liturgical Consultation) texts for shared and ecumenical texts. The Church of England's *Common Worship* varied them (eg by using 'and was made man' in the Nicene Creed not 'and became truly human') and the new Roman Catholic English translation of the missal uses completely different versions (and style). The recent (2024) revisions to *Worship from the United Reformed Church* retained the use of ELLC texts. The Reims Statement[54] (regarding the continuing ELLC work) encourages continuance of commitment to ELLC and Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).

6.2 Such texts would include:

- Glory to God in the Highest
- Holy, holy, holy and Blessed is he who comes
- Lamb of God
- Lord's Prayer
- Nicene Creed
- Apostles' Creed
- Preface dialogue[55]

6.3 As a principle, it is proposed that the ELLC texts be kept but that alternatives be included as well that use a wider range of imagery and language. In particular, noting the success of 'A New Creed' (United Church of Canada),[56] it is suggested that a succinct and poetic affirmation of faith in a (British) Methodist voice would be a good thing to have alongside the ELLC texts of the creeds.

6.4 It is recommended that the new resources include the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Lord's Prayer in a recognisably traditional format, probably the ELLC text. There are still decisions to make about whether, in the case of the Lord's Prayer both "Our Father, who art in heaven" and "Our Father in heaven" should be included routinely or whether different choices might be made in different resources.

6.5 Alongside considering a new affirmation of faith, another possibility is whether to include a 'radically' alternative "Lord's Prayer"? This would be in essence a

54 https://www.englishtexts.org/the-reims-statement

55 This is the opening of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at Holy Communion: "The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Lift up your hearts…" It is sometimes known by the Latin phrase *Sursum corda*.

56 https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements/new-creed-1968

prayer that paraphrased the Lord's Prayer and followed its themes rather than being a version of it as such. This would provide a way of addressing some of the issues around language such as 'Father' in this context and could give a useful alternative which will be valuable in some contexts and situations. See, for example, Jim Cotter's text.[57]

6.6 One place it is proposed to alter the ELLC texts is by using 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' in liturgies of Holy Communion. At one level, its primary referent is messianic so it could be argued that the masculine is not inappropriate; at another, it also has a secondary meaning as part of the worshipper's approach to the Lord's Table for which broader language would be good. This version still gives a clear messianic reference while also allowing a more inclusive approach to the secondary meaning.[58]

6.7 In general, following the concept of working expansively, it is proposed to keep the well-known and ecumenical texts in an easily recognisable version (ideally one used in common with ecumenical partners) but to provide other texts as well, which give the opportunity for a greater diversity of images and language.

7. Principles for the Conference to adopt

7.1 The nature of liturgical style and language is that it continues to develop and this is of course as it should be. The aim of this report is not to fix liturgical language at a single point but to try and encapsulate principles that can govern the liturgical revision work that is ahead. The Conference is invited to agree the principles set out here in order that they can then guide working groups who are responsible for producing particular sets of resources. Without unduly fettering creative freedom, it is hoped that this will enable a broad consistency of approach and ensure that the language used reflects the kind of Church the Methodist Church seeks to be.

7.2 In the light of the foregoing discussion, the following principles are proposed:

- Language which seeks to be inclusive and expansive
- Recognition of variety of traditions

57 https://worshipwords.co.uk/earth-maker-a-modern-lords-prayer-new-zealand

58 The ELLC's publication *Praying Together* notes "The quotation of Psalm 118:26a in the eucharistic celebration refers not to everyone who comes in God's name but specifically to Jesus our Savior." However, liturgy frequently has multiple levels of meaning and in this case it is appropriate also to be attentive to the more general sense of the *Benedictus*. See https://www.englishtexts.org/sanctus-and-benedictus.

- Resources in different registers where appropriate
- Variety of forms of addresses for God (within liturgies as well as between liturgies)
- The use of ELLC versions of common texts
- A recognisably traditional form of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, alongside work on a distinctive new affirmation of faith
- Drawing on a diversity of sources
- Doctrinally faithful and true to our Methodist emphases

8. Suggestions for preachers and leaders of worship

8.1 The discussion and principles set out in this report have relevance to all worship in the Methodist Church, whether or not it makes use of officially produced liturgical resources. As was observed above, the recommendations of the 1992 report on *Inclusive Language and Imagery for God* remain largely unimplemented in much Methodist worship. The Faith and Order Committee expresses the hope that the present task provides an opportunity for a broader connexional conversation about the language and imagery used in worship. As well as its specific purpose in resourcing the revision of our authorised liturgy, this report can also provide a basis for resourcing such a conversation.

8.2 This report is offered then to all who preach or lead worship in Methodist Churches with an invitation for reflection and conversation. Local Preachers' meetings may wish to take the opportunity to discuss this report, in sections or as a whole. Continuing Development sessions could cover some of the topics which this report considers. Such meetings and sessions could helpfully be opened to others, including Worship Leaders and Church Stewards, or indeed could open to all interested persons to attend. In this way, the Committee hopes that the opportunity that may have been missed with the 1992 report could now be taken.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

41/1. The Conference receives the Report.

41/2. The Conference adopts the principles set out in section 7 and directs the Faith and Order Committee to follow them in drafting and revising liturgical resources.

41/3. The Conference encourages all Methodist preachers and leaders of worship to study this report and to reflect on the language and imagery used in the worship they lead.