

Positive **Working Together**

Shared Commitments



A reflective half-day session for church councils or groups

Objectives

1. To explore good working relationships in the Church.
2. To look at effective ways of managing conflict in the Church.

Before the session

Ensure that all participants have received a copy of *Positive Working Together – A Short Guide* and are aware of the *Guidelines*. Both are available on the Methodist Church website at www.methodistchurch.org.uk.

Welcome and introductions

Note that this may bring up difficult issues for – and possibly between – some of those present. This is not the time to focus on difficulties.

It is important that someone is available after the session if anyone needs to talk about a particular experience.

Devotions

Suggested reading: Romans 12

Bless to us, O God, this day, fresh made.

In the chorus of birds, bless us.

In the scent of blossom, bless us.

*In the wet grass and the spring flowers,
bless us.*

*Bless us and heal us for we come to you in
love and in trust.*

We come to you in expectant hope.

O God,

*give us a well of tears to wash away the
hurts of our lives.*

*O God, give us a well of tears
to cleanse the wounds,*

to bathe the battered face of our world.

*O God, give us a well of tears
or we are left, like arid earth,
unsanctified.¹*

Lord,

you know our deepest desires

and we know the vision of your Kingdom...

*we bring before you those elements in our
lives*

in need of your transforming power:

that which we misuse or neglect,

that which we reluctantly let go of,

that which we believe is not good enough:

*inspire us and disturb us to examine our
deepest desires.²*

We hold before God:

those for whom life is very difficult;

*those who have difficult decisions to make,
and*

*those who honestly do not know what is the
right thing to do.*

Amen³

¹ and ² Kathy Galloway, *The Pattern of Our Days* (2007), Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, available from www.ionabooks.com ³ William Barclay in *A Barclay Prayer Book*, SCM Press, Norwich, 1990

Ground rules

- a. Show respect for each other and speak one at a time.
- b. Speak for yourself not for others.
- c. Treat all personal matters shared today in confidence.
- d. Keep mobile phones switched off throughout this time together.

Activity: Icebreaker

Affirming we can work together today in a safe space.

(Allow 15 minutes for this exercise.)

Give each participant a piece of paper headed: "Something you may not know about me" and ask them to write one thing on it, fold it and place it in the hat.

Mix up the papers and pass the hat round for each person to take a piece of paper.

Read them aloud in turn and try and work out whose they may be.

Introduction

- Outline the aims of the session.
- Refer to the documents and answer any immediate queries.
- Explain that with any group of people, including the Church, we have different experiences and different opinions. This can lead to conflict, which in itself is not a bad thing and can be creative.

However, when differences lead to destructive behaviour, it becomes harmful. It is particularly harmful when it involves the misuse of power, leading to bullying and harassment.

Your opinion of how differences should be handled in the Church

Activity: Human rainbow

- Form a line or semicircle of all participants across the floor. Those with January birthdays to stand at one end, those with December birthdays at the other, and ask everyone else to sort themselves out along the spectrum.

Ask them, in turn, to say what is positive and negative about having their birthday when it is.

- **Use the 'human rainbow' to help us value the different positions people hold (noting that no position is wrong).**

Place a card stating: "Relishes open disagreements and heated discussion" at one end. At the other end, place a card stating: "Doesn't like to disagree and would rather keep quiet".

Ask people to position themselves on the rainbow without speaking

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to each other. They may put themselves at what they judge to be the right point for them on the rainbow – the cards are simply points on the whole spectrum:

At one end of the rainbow

You believe that open disagreement and even heated discussion can reveal where people disagree, and this helps you make good decisions.

At the other end

You believe it is wrong to disagree, even if that means you don't say what you really think.

Around the centre

You believe decisions are best made after discussion – so long as we don't upset anyone.

When all are in position:

- a.** People share with the whole group what they observe about the rainbow.
- b.** People chat with one or two others near to them about why they chose that position. After a suitable time, invite the small groups to share their findings with the whole group. Encourage all to understand others' positions.
- c.** Draw out the value of healthy disagreement. Point out that this should not be accompanied by personal antagonism or hurtful remarks.

- d.** Draw out the value of healthy agreement, ie when you may not hold that viewpoint but are content to go with the majority.
- e.** Mention the *Positive Working Together Guidelines* and the support it offers for our working together.

From bullying and harassment to positive working together

- Without looking at the *Short Guide*, participants write down their own definition of bullying and harassment. Discuss definitions in pairs.
- Invite feedback, referring to the definition on page 2.
- Invite participants to recall an occasion when they have been bullied, or have bullied someone else, or have seen someone else being bullied. Emphasise that this should not be a major incident, but does need to include a misuse of power. (Refer to Appendix 3 of the *Guidelines* to give examples if needed.)
- Give sufficient time for everyone to do this and then create groups of three or four to discuss the following:
 - 1.** Each group member gives a brief description of the incident or the relationship where bullying took place.
 - 2.** The group asks any questions to

clarify their understanding of what has been described.

3. The group lists (eg on a sheet of flipchart paper) how the behaviour differed from what the Church would expect of those involved.
4. Each group displays its list in turn

and offers any additional words of explanation.

Communication

Drawing on the issues raised by the previous section, introduce the issue of communication.

Activity: Disagreements in the Church

What do you do when you have a disagreement with someone in the Church family?

Participants complete the following questionnaire and then compare answers in pairs.

If you have a disagreement with someone and need to communicate about it with them, do you:

	About the same matter	About a different matter
Speak face to face		
Speak on the telephone		
Make contact via email		
Make contact via text message		
Make contact via letter		
None of the above (please explain)		

- Draw out and reflect on how different modes of communication are more or less susceptible to bullying.
- Invite participants to look at the list of guidelines for communicating well on page 4 of the *Short Guide*. Ask everyone to choose one which s/he feels particularly helpful to her/him.
- Invite each participant to say which s/he has chosen and briefly give reasons.
- The leader draws attention to the *How we treat each other* section on page 5 of the *Short Guide*.

Positive working together in disagreements

- Explain that difference is natural in any group of people, including the Church. Despite Charles Wesley saying that “we think and speak the same, and cordially agree”, we don’t! The apostle Paul knew this – see Romans 12:9-21. Imagine what might have been going on which led him to write this passage.
- However, when tension is added to difference, conflict arises. This in itself is not harmful, but can lead to poor behaviour when handled badly.
- Use the case study (taken from Appendix 1 of the *Guidelines*). Invite participants in groups of three or four to discuss the following:
 1. What was helpful/unhelpful about the Revd Christopher Jones avoiding conflict with Ruth?
 2. How could he have handled his relationship with Ruth differently, so that the conflict described did not occur?
 3. Suggest how each would respond separately to the question, “What will you now do to seek a better relationship with the other person?” This could be done as a role play with participants who have been primed beforehand.
 4. Looking at the sources of support in the *Short Guide*, where would participants suggest Ruth and

Christopher go to seek support if s/he decides this is what s/he needs?

Conclusion

Gather up your time together by considering:

“Conflict is natural, normal, neutral, and sometimes even delightful. It can turn into painful or disastrous ends, but it doesn’t need to. Conflict is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. Conflict simply is.”⁴

*We hold before God:
those who have difficult tasks to do and to face,
and who fear they may fail in them;
those who have difficult temptations to face,
and
who know only too well that they may fall to them, if they try to meet them alone.*

*We hold before God:
those who have difficult people to work with;
those who have to suffer unjust treatment,
unfair
criticism, unappreciated work.*

*We hold before God:
Those who are sad because someone they loved has died;
and any who are disappointed in something for
which they had hoped very much.*⁵

⁴ *Caring Enough to Confront*, David Augsburg (Regal, 2009) ⁵ William Barclay in *A Barclay Prayer Book*, SCM Press, Norwich, 1990

*If our days darken
May hope bud within us as the ivy does,
Blossoming into green, unexpected flowers
when the winter comes.⁶*

*May we discover that the road we didn't
choose
didn't want to travel,
is a highway that leads unerringly
towards the light.
Amen⁷*

Case study: Consequences of not dealing with conflict

The Revd Christopher Jones and Ruth Wharton had avoided any major clashes for the previous two years, though neither had ever found the other easy to be with. Ruth preferred to be in control and was highly organised in relation to her work as Church Treasurer. Christopher's apparent lack of interest in finances frustrated Ruth enormously, as did the endless excuses he gave for always arriving late to meetings due to "pastoral issues". Only once had Christopher actually read the detailed monthly accounts provided by Ruth prior to the finance meetings, and that had appeared to make little or no difference to his understanding of them, as far as Ruth could see. In this way Christopher reminded Ruth of her father, whom she remembered as being lazy and irresponsible, especially when it came to money matters. Though she was now relatively well off, Ruth's husband allowed her virtually no say in how their family finances were managed. When the opportunity had arisen for her to use her accounting skills as Church Treasurer, she had grabbed it with both hands.

There had been two minor incidents between them since Christopher's appointment as minister. Each time Christopher had backed down immediately, believing this to be the right thing to do in the face of what he experienced as Ruth's rude and unacceptably aggressive stance over what he believed to be relatively minor issues. Christopher hated the idea of being in conflict with one of his members and felt that to be so would show he had failed in his ministry. He had often been praised for his pastoral abilities, an area he saw as a key strength. He was convinced that his ability to bring peace and acceptance to difficult situations would help in his troubled relationship with Ruth. As if to prove this, Ruth had been uncharacteristically pleasant towards him for several months after each of these incidents. She had even made a point of thanking him publicly for his willingness to listen and to accept advice. He had noticed, however, that on neither occasion had Ruth apologised for her rudeness towards him, despite this being worse on the second occasion.

The issue of the potential purchase of the Community Hall brought the problems in their relationship to a head. The hall lay adjacent to the church building and had been empty for several years prior to suddenly coming up for sale. Christopher had long seen this building as the perfect opportunity to provide the type of open, flexible space which, in his view, the church with its traditional pews had always lacked. Owning and adapting the hall would broaden the church's appeal to young people, families and potential new user groups,

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⁶ and ⁷ © Frances Copsey, *A Book of Blessings* (2007), Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, available from www.ionabooks.com

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including those from the margins of society. His vision was for the type of thriving, modern, forward-looking church which had brought him into ministry in the first place.

As it happened the announcement of the sale occurred in the same week that Christopher found out that his mother, for whom he was the main carer, had been diagnosed with dementia.

After a difficult week re-organising his mother's care schedule, alongside conducting two funerals and coordinating a large fund-raising event as part of his involvement with a local hospice, Christopher arrived at the meeting he had called to discuss the possible purchase of the Community Hall. Despite everything happening that week, he had managed to prepare, with his daughter's help, a short PowerPoint presentation that described his vision for how the new building might be used. He was particularly pleased with himself for this as he was aware of his reputation for not being particularly well-organised in terms of preparation for meetings or use of new technology.

As he reached the front door of the church, where the meeting was being held, he interrupted Ruth and one of the church stewards who had clearly been deep in conversation up to that point. The steward, someone he regarded as a good friend, acknowledged him and asked after his mother but appeared uncomfortable and embarrassed. Ruth ignored him completely, walking away from him and into the meeting room without even looking at him.

As soon as Christopher opened the meeting Ruth's body language projected boredom and dismissiveness. This continued throughout his presentation and on two occasions Ruth looked at her watch whilst he was speaking. When he put his favourite image on the screen (a group of young offenders he had worked with in a previous appointment) Ruth frowned and looked quizzical as if to say "what's that got to do with us?". He found this gesture deeply upsetting and undermining. Overall he felt that his presentation (and his own performance) had fallen flat, especially when compared with the excitement he had felt whilst preparing it the previous evening.

As soon as the meeting was opened up for discussion Ruth spoke first. She thanked Christopher for his "lovely" presentation and went on to explain in great detail, backed up by copies of a complex financial spreadsheet which she handed out, why it was irresponsible for the church to even consider purchasing the hall. She concluded by saying that surely anybody with even the most basic understanding of finances would see that the proposal was naïve and ill-conceived.