

FINDING THE WAY

GETTING STARTED WITH
A METHODIST WAY OF LIFE



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The **Methodist** Church 

USING THIS STUDY GUIDE

For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Ephesians 2:10

The purpose of this study guide is to help you explore and get the most from a *Methodist Way of Life*. It is my hope that working through this will strengthen your faith and deepen your spiritual life.

In order to achieve this, I encourage you to work slowly and prayerfully through the guide. Allow yourself time, not only to read what is here, but also to follow up the suggestions and, most importantly, to engage in the exercises. At the end of each section there are recommendations of things to do. These are an integral part of the process. As in any fitness regime, it's doing the exercises that makes the difference!

It will be helpful to read through this guide with someone else. This might be a trusted friend or prayer partner, or a small group with whom you can discuss your thoughts on each section and share your experiences from the exercises. The questions posed and the practices suggested will be more effective, when shared. If it is not possible for you to work with someone else, you can still tackle the exercises and keep a journal of your thoughts and reflections. Perhaps you may find someone with whom you can share these at a later stage.

PRAYER

Here is a prayer for the journey through this booklet.

Gracious God,

Thank you for your extraordinary love shown to us in Jesus.

Help us to live each moment of each day in gratitude, loving those around us and witnessing to the ways of your kingdom.

Refresh us continually in the power of the Holy Spirit to be people of the Way.

Amen.



A Methodist Way of Life

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

As far as we are able, with God's help:

Worship

- We will pray daily.
- We will worship with others regularly.
- We will look and listen for God in Scripture, and the world.

Learning and Caring

- We will care for ourselves and those around us.
- We will learn more about our faith.
- We will practise hospitality and generosity.

Service

- We will help people in our communities and beyond.
- We will care for creation and all God's gifts.
- We will challenge injustice.

Evangelism

- We will speak of the love of God.
- We will live in a way that draws others to Jesus.
- We will share our faith with others.

**May we be a blessing within and beyond God's Church,
for the transformation of the world.**

WHAT IS A METHODIST WAY OF LIFE?

A *Methodist Way of Life* sets out what it means to be a Methodist. It puts into words how we try to live our lives in response to God's love made known to us in Jesus.

A *Methodist Way of Life* is both new and old. It is new, in that it was first discussed by the Methodist Conference in 2018 and was shared with all Methodists in 2020. But it is based on what Methodists agreed was their calling in the year 2000 and that, in turn, was built on what Methodists have always done, since the days of John Wesley, as they tried to follow Jesus and live out the Christian faith.

It is a way of living.

Making use of a rule of life

Some people might refer to this as a 'rule of life'. John Wesley believed that the purpose of Methodism was to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land", and that every Christian needed to grow in holiness. That is why he established Societies.

In these communities people helped each other on the journey towards being what God wanted them to be. His Societies had rules. The core was that Methodists would do no harm; they would seek to do good wherever they could; and they would develop a pattern of prayer and worship to draw near to God regularly.

Wesley wrote further rules for the members of Societies and for the preachers who helped him in his work (known as the *Twelve Rules of a Helper*). These included rules for the singing of hymns and directions for small group meetings.

He even outlined a rule for handling personal finance in his sermon on the 'Use of Money', namely:

Earn all you can, save all you can, in order to give all you can.

All these 'rules' were drawn from the New Testament, especially the life and teaching of Jesus. This collection of sayings could be viewed as a **way of life** for early Methodists.

A **rule of life** has an even older heritage. Early monastic communities from the third century AD developed rules of life for their communities, such as the rule of Benedict. Those entering the monastic communities sought to live out their response to the God who loves them by following this pattern of living.

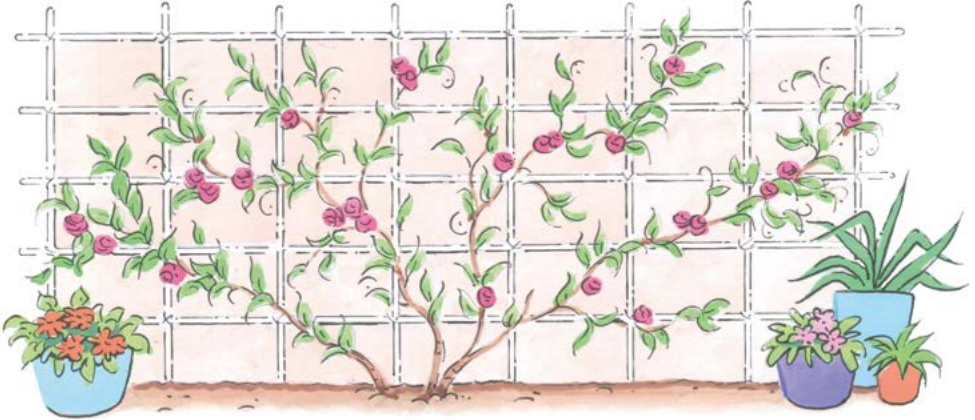
Older still are rules of life articulated in the Bible itself. Almost eight centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Micah set out what God wanted of his people in three short phrases:

And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

In modern times, groups of Christians have devised rules of life to help them live their Christian calling. Methodist Deacons live by a rule of life which provides a rhythm of prayer and support for the members and work of this dispersed order. The Northumbria Community has a simple rule of life: availability and vulnerability. Similar rules of life are part of belonging to the Iona Community or the Scargill Movement.

How does a rule of life help? ➡

It is best not to think of a rule of life as a list of commands to obey (and fail at) but rather like a trellis or framework on which to grow. Just as a trellis allows and enables a plant to thrive, so a rule of life can give structure and space to develop a healthy, holy Christian lifestyle.



As the Methodist Diaconal Order describes it:

A rule of life should enable us to develop a balanced, sustainable and enjoyable rhythm of life. Its purpose is to map out for us in a few practical ways the different dimensions of our calling, helping us to balance, rather than be driven by, the many demands of life.

Having a way or rule of life is helpful in a number of ways.

- It lists core commitments and practices that lie at the heart of Christian faith. Reading it regularly reminds us of those things and so **focuses and strengthens** Christian living.
- It provides a **sense of being part of something bigger**. It is not just me that seeks to live like this – others are on the same path. With a *Methodist Way of Life*, it is all those in my local church and across the Connexion who are following Jesus in this way.

- It **challenges us to tackle the things we find hard**. There are some aspects of a *Methodist Way of Life* that we will be comfortable with, and others we will suspect we are not good at. Following this path together will encourage us to take up some of those difficult tasks.
- It helps us to **reflect** on our Christian life and seek help and support when needed. It also gives us a pointer for prayer for our companions who are with us 'on the way'.

This type of rule does not replace the spiritual disciplines of prayer, reading the Bible, participating in worship or learning from others, rather it points us towards those practices, reminding and encouraging us to live in this way daily.

A response to God's love






A *Methodist Way of Life* is held within a framework of God's love. Remember "we love, because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God's love for us exists before any response we make. Paul says that it was when we were sinners, enemies and far off from God that Christ died for us (Romans 5). This demonstrates that we are loved by God before we even begin to make a response, and this love continues towards us no matter what. As an old saying has it: "There is nothing you can do to make God love you more and nothing you can do to make God love you less." We are loved. That is the good news.

Without this sense of God's love, a way or rule of life is of little use. It becomes just another list of things to do. But, as people loved by God, we can use a way of life to shape our response in everyday life, living in and spreading God's love.

There are times, of course, when we cannot fulfil these commitments because of personal circumstances or illness. Notice that the opening words to the commitments are "as far as we are able". Sometimes we are not able. At such times, we remember we are still loved and we are part of a church that prays, serves and witnesses, even if we can't do so ourselves at that moment.

A *Methodist Way of Life* is an invitation to live for the God who loves us and to express the pattern of Jesus in our daily lives.

Exercises

-  Read the commitments aloud. How does it feel when we say the words together with others? Why do you think it says 'we' rather than 'I' on each commitment?
-  Work through the commitments. Is there anything you want to add as a way of living out your faith?
-  Why do you think John Wesley developed rules?
-  Find out more about a rule of life. Look at some of the rules of life of different Christian communities (many are available online). Which do you find helpful or unhelpful?
-  How would you express the way of life to which you are called as a Christian?

CHRISTIAN PRACTICES

Believing and acting

Jesus told a parable about two sons who were asked to work in their father's field. One said, "Yes I will!", but didn't. The other objected and refused to do it, but in the end he went and did what was asked. Jesus said to those listening: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The answer is obvious. (Matthew 21:28-31)

It isn't just what we say we believe that counts, but how we put it into action. Our faith gives us a worldview of the creator God, who has redeemed the world in love through Jesus and will, in the end, fully bring in the kingdom of justice and peace. However, Christians are not passive believers, rather they live on the basis of what they believe, participating in what God is doing here and now. As it says in the first letter of John:

Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

(1 John 3:18)

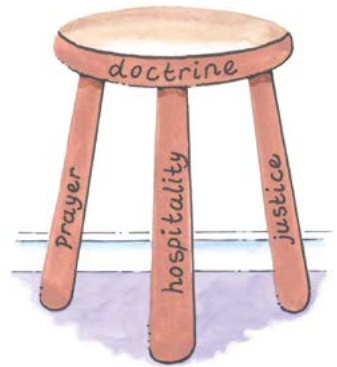
And, as the letter of James puts it:

... my works will show you my faith.

(James 2:18)

Theologian Elaine Heath offers a way of seeing the relationship between what we believe and what we do. She sees both as having a part in forming us as disciples.

Let's imagine disciple formation as a three-legged stool. The flat part of the stool you sit on is doctrine. The three legs that support the seat are sets of practices. One leg is a set of practices called prayer. Another leg is a set of practices called hospitality. The third leg is a set of practices called justice. The entire stool is able to support the weight of human life individually and corporately when all the pieces are in place. Disciple formation requires formation in all the practices as well as beliefs. But practices are foundational. This is why in the early church Christianity was simply known as 'the Way'.



Elaine's stool has three legs. In a *Methodist Way of Life*, you could say there are four legs: worship; learning and caring; service and evangelism. The point is the same. Belief on its own will be lifeless, if it is not put into practice.

Another way to think of the relationship between belief and practice is through the notion of a recipe. You read about a new recipe by your favourite celebrity chef; the food in the picture looks delicious, and you can't wait to try it. But until you get the ingredients and try making it you don't know if it will taste as good as you expect. You will have to put it into practice and it may take several tries before you are confident in making the dish.

Putting it into practice

A dictionary definition of a practice might be 'the application or use of a belief', 'the habitual way of doing something' and the 'repeated performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency'. For Christians, a practice is putting into everyday living the central convictions in the gospel, in such a way that these become habits, developing a Christ-like character.

In the book, *Holy Habits*, Andrew Roberts suggests there are ten practices that characterise Christian living. Using the verses from Acts 2:42-47, he identifies core Christian practices as:

- Biblical Teaching
- Breaking Bread
- Fellowship
- Prayer
- Sharing Resources
- Serving
- Eating Together
- Gladness and Generosity
- Worship
- Making Disciples.

These provide a good starting point, but you can identify other practices in the Bible if you look, such as:

- Acting Justly (Micah 6:8)
- Hospitality (Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:2)
- Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22 and Colossians 3:13)
- Loving Enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The reality is that any rule or way of life, in highlighting some practices, will miss or not include others. A *Methodist Way of Life* chooses to focus on the practices that are connected with the four areas of *Our Calling*.

Stories

Marta looks out for her neighbours and calls on some who are lonely or housebound each week to have a chat and to take some homemade cake.









Stories

Although he is basically quite shy, Jason always looks out for new people at his church and goes to speak to them. He does this because when he ventured over the threshold for the first time, someone made him feel welcome.

Kwisi and her children regularly join the 'litter pick' in their town. She has also attended some demonstrations about climate change.

Michael makes a habit of praying for each of the people in his team at work. He has shared this with them in a sensitive way and his colleagues now regularly ask him to pray for them or someone they know in need.

Exercises

-  How do you think belief and practice relate together? Do you find the metaphors of the stool and recipe helpful? How would you express it?
-  Go through the practices listed on the commitment card. Which already have a part in your life, which would you like to grow in? Keep a diary for a week. Fill it in at the end of the day, saying:
 -  Where you noticed God that day.
 -  Which of the practices you saw in yourself or someone else.Reflect at the end of the week on what you have learned.
-  Who do you admire or look up to as a Christian? What is it that shows their faith in practice?
-  Many life habits were once skills you learned by practising, such as cleaning your teeth, riding a bike or driving a car. Can you think of a habit you had to work hard to develop? Have you habits you would like to change?

WORSHIP

The Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love.

- *We will pray daily.*
- *We will worship with others regularly.*
- *We will look and listen for God in Scripture, and the world.*

Developing a pattern of prayer and worship is core to Christian living. It is our first response to a God who has shown love for us. We are called into a relationship with God and developing that relationship is our primary task.

Good relationships are built on speaking and listening, spending time with someone and learning about each other. When I was travelling a lot, I would try to phone home every day. Very often, my wife and I spoke only about trivial things: what we had done during the day, who we had met, news of the wider family, even the weather. It was hardly world changing, but it maintained and deepened our relationship. We knew each other better, became more sensitive to each other's moods and delighted in simply hearing the other's voice.

At the heart of prayer and worship is something very similar. It is about being in touch with God regularly; sharing both the mundane and the deepest parts of who we are.

Of course, growing in our relationship with God is different from the relationship with a partner, inasmuch as one person in the relationship is God – the source of all life and being. Getting to know God takes time and discipline; and recognising God's presence and God's voice is often learned slowly. That is why this relationship needs both structure and commitment.

We will worship with others regularly

Meeting together with other Christians for worship will be important. In this shared activity, there will be elements to help us. Reading the Bible, and reflecting on it will help us to know more of God. When we participate in prayers of praise, adoration, confession, thanksgiving and intercession this helps us to explore different dimensions of prayer. Singing and saying words together reminds us of our shared journey, as well as the poetic nature of trying to express truths about God. Similarly, focusing on an object, lighting candles and keeping silence together all allow us to approach the mystery of God.

Holy Communion was especially important for John Wesley. He urged Methodists to take communion in the parish church on Sundays. When we share in bread and wine, we meet Christ in a special way. Methodists see it as both confirming our faith and also as a way that some may come to faith. It has a key place in developing our practice of worship.

We will pray daily

But as well as worshipping with others, we need to find time within our individual lives for openness to God. That is why a *Methodist Way of Life* suggests that we commit to daily prayer. Making a space in our day, however short, consciously to place ourselves in God's presence; to share the things that are on our hearts and in our lives; to give thanks and to pray for others and perhaps most important (and most difficult) to be still and listen to God.

Most people find they need some structure in order to pray every day. Some:

- read Scripture and have Bible notes to help explore the meaning
- use the Methodist App and log into the daily Bible reflection online such as *Word in Time*
- work through the Methodist Prayer Handbook
- follow morning and evening prayer in the Methodist Worship Book or a similar daily prayer liturgy, such as those of Corrymeela or the Northumbria community

- have a pattern of silence, lighting a candle for focus and then waiting on God
- walk or spend time in their garden talking with God.

None of these is the right or only way. The essential point is spending time with God.

We will look and listen for God in Scripture, and the world

Christians do not do this to gain merit, or even to get better at praying and worship, but to nurture habits that will help them to recognise God in everyday life. The third Worship commitment is to look and listen for God in Scripture and in the world. We are to be alert to the presence of God and the prompting of the Holy Spirit everywhere – in nature, in family, in work, in books, in films, in leisure, in our local community and in world events. God is present and at work everywhere. We are learning to recognise and respond to the Divine.

Here is an extract from *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.*

Story

A Native American and his friend were in downtown New York, walking near Times Square in Manhattan. It was during the rush hour and the streets were filled with people. Cars were honking their horns, taxicabs were squealing around the corners, sirens were wailing and the sounds of the city were almost deafening.

Suddenly, the Native American said, "I hear a cricket".

His friend said, "What, you must be crazy. You couldn't possibly hear a cricket in all this noise!"

“No, I’m sure of it,” the Native American said. “I heard a cricket.”

“That’s crazy,” said the friend.

The Native American listened carefully for a moment, and then walked across the street to where some shrubs were growing on a piece of waste land. He looked into the bushes, beneath the branches, and sure enough, he located a small cricket.

His friend was utterly amazed. “That’s incredible,” said the friend. “You must have superhuman ears!”

“No,” said the Native American. “My ears are no different from yours. It all depends on what you’re listening for.”






“Yes, that’s true,” his friend replied. “It depends on what is really important to you. Here, let me show you.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a few coins and dropped them on the sidewalk. Then, with the noise of the crowd still blaring in their ears, they noticed every head within twenty feet turn and look to see if the money that tinkled on the pavement was theirs.

“See what I mean?” asked the Native American. “It all depends on what’s important to you.”

Source unknown



Exercises

-  Reflect on the poem and the story. What do they tell you about recognising God?
-  When have you felt close to God recently?
-  What is your current way of praying? How easy or hard is it to pray every day?
-  Do you have a favourite picture or image that reminds you of God or helps you pray? What music helps you come close to God?
-  Keep a daily diary of your prayer time for one week. Note down the thoughts and questions that came to you; the feelings you had; any times you felt close to, or distant from, God.

LEARNING AND CARING

The Church exists to help people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care.

- We will care for ourselves and those around us.
- We will learn more about our faith.
- We will practise hospitality and generosity.

If worship and prayer are primarily focused on God, this aspect of a *Methodist Way of Life* relates to our Christian community. As *Our Calling* puts it, the Church is to grow and learn through mutual support and care. In other words, learning and caring is about how Christians relate to one another, help one another, encourage one another and grow as a community that reflects Christ.

‘One-anotherness’ is a feature pervading the New Testament. Paul speaks of it often, he says we are to:

- welcome one another (Romans 15:7)
- instruct one another (Romans 15:14)
- comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
- be kind to one another and forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)
- build one another up in love and to be servants to one another (Galatians 5:13).

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews echoes the same idea, as do the letters of James and Peter. Most significant is Jesus’ new commandment “to love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12), which is repeated many times in the Gospel and letters of John.

Entering into a relationship with God through Christ puts us in a special relationship with other Christians, with whom we become the Body of Christ.

By acting in 'one-anotherness' we strengthen the Body, learn more about God and display the character of Jesus.

We will care for ourselves and those around us

However, 'one-anotherness' doesn't mean that we are to restrict our love and care to those who are Christians. Far from it. We are to care for one another so that we might be better able to love our neighbours, family, work colleagues and even our enemies.

Neither does it mean that we neglect ourselves. We are to love our neighbours as ourselves and look after our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. So caring for oneself, resting when we are tired, enjoying things we like doing, getting a good balance of work and leisure is healthy, enabling us to care for others.

It does mean, however, that we have a responsibility towards other members of the Church. Each Christian is now part of a community that carries the message of God's love. The way we behave with each other in church can be a microcosm or living example of care, and a vision of what the world could be.

So when we say "we will care for ourselves and those around us" we are committing to the practice of caring within and beyond the congregation.

We will learn more about our faith

The Christian community is also a learning community. We commit to learning "about our faith". This means principally learning to be Christian. It is not learning in general – history, science, or mathematics, though learning about God's world will also teach us about God – but learning how to live as a Christian. Such learning is not automatic or intuitive and we mostly learn it from other Christians, sometimes without even realising we are learning, as this extract by Norma Cook Everist shows.

At Small Grace Church community members continually teach and learn from one another. The couple who usher sometimes invite the children

to join them in carrying the communion elements and basket from the food pantry to the altar. Young Cameron, living with muscular dystrophy, took his turn at ushering, manoeuvring his wheelchair with the basket on his lap. A couple married for fifty years, by their presence, taught the young couple struggling to make it through five years of commitment. The organist, as she was battling cancer, taught the entire congregation how to die.

Of course, learning may also be through:

- a study course
- an Alpha group
- a Lent programme
- a retreat or conference
- Sunday School or Junior Church
- sermons and talks.

We will practise hospitality and generosity

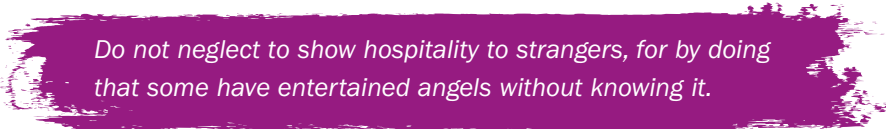
A Methodist Way of Life identifies hospitality and generosity as practices that express learning and caring. That is because they reflect the character of God and need to be at the heart of church life.

Hospitality is often seen in providing refreshments when people come together. Methodists are good at this! Whether it is simply tea and biscuits before or after an evening meeting, a harvest supper or a big bring-and-share meal for a special occasion, there will be a group of people who see this as something they can and must do, their Christian duty. They may enjoy doing it too!

In the Bible, hospitality is this and more. The New Testament uses two different Greek words for hospitality. One means to show love to strangers, echoing such texts as Deuteronomy 10:16-18. The other means to make space for a guest. This word is used in the Acts of the Apostles when Simon the Tanner made space for Peter to lodge in his home, but is also used when the Athenians heard Paul. They were interested in what he had to say, even though it was strange to them. They said they would make space to

hear more (Acts 17:20). So in addition to welcoming people, and perhaps offering food and drink, it means to make space – to make space at your table, in your life and in your heart. That is how God is with us. God makes space for us in love even though we are far from God's holiness.

Hospitality is an attitude of openness to others, to learn about them and from them, to widen our understanding and perhaps to be changed by the encounter. The classic Bible story about hospitality is that of Abraham welcoming three strangers. Abraham makes them comfortable and gives them food, but the three travellers also bring something. What they bring changes Sarah and Abraham's lives forever (Genesis 18). Hebrews 13:2 picks up on this when it says:



Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hospitality is both giving and receiving. In the Christian Church showing hospitality to one another means caring for the basic needs of people, food, drink and friendship, but it also means learning about others and growing through the conversations and even the disagreements we have.

Generosity is also a basic Christian practice. As we have freely received, so we are to give freely. Principally we give because of God's inexpressible gift in Jesus (2 Corinthians 9:15). Our generosity will include what we give in the collection plate or by standing order to the church, and to appeals of *All We Can*, *Action for Children*, *Methodist Homes* and other charities. It also goes beyond these in our use of time, talents and attention.

Story

My wife's uncles are both well over ninety and one has dementia. Since their retirement, 30 or so years ago, they had lived in a remote farmhouse in south-west Scotland. A couple of years ago, for health reasons, they had to leave the farm and now live in a care home. It was an even bigger wrench for them because they were no longer able to attend the church they were part of; their new home is many miles away.

When I visited recently, the leader in their care home team showed me some photos she had taken of the two uncles visiting their old home and attending a meal put on by the local church there. On her day off she had taken them on a visit. She was not required to do this, and she was not paid to do it, but had generously given her time to take them on the trip. It was clear from the photos what it meant to these two elderly men.



Exercises

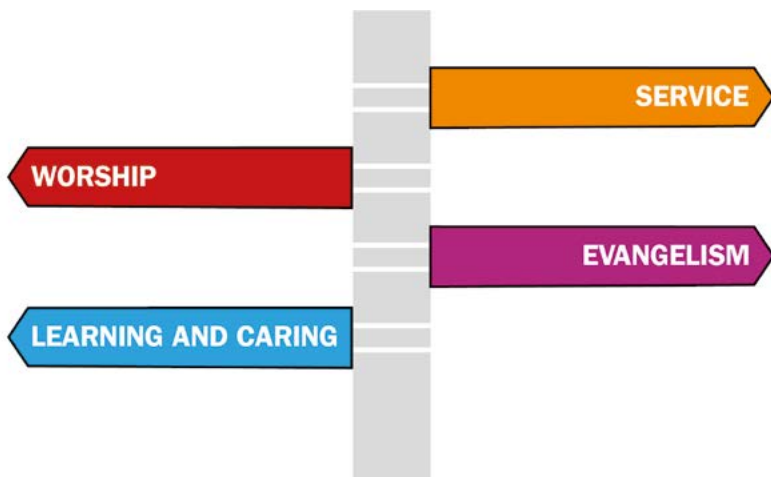
- ▶ To what extent does 'one-anotherness' capture what it means to be the church? What other images help you to picture what the church is about?
- ▶ List the people who have helped you to learn what it means to be Christian. What did you learn from each one? Give thanks for these and reflect on how and what you are learning now.
- ▶ Read the story of Abraham in Genesis 18. What is given and received in this story? How easy is it to receive?
- ▶ How does the idea of 'making space for...' help you think about hospitality?
- ▶ What has been the most generous or hospitable act that has been done to you or that you have witnessed?
- ▶ How do you practise hospitality and generosity at the moment?
- ▶ Looking at your church, what shows that it is a caring community?

BREATHING IN AND OUT

Life is dependent on the rhythm of breathing in and out. Without the steady, mostly unnoticed, regularity of breathing we would die. Breathing in draws oxygen into our lungs, which in turn powers our bodies. Breathing out expels carbon dioxide and makes room for a new intake of breath.

Spiritual life has a similar rhythm. We spend time with God, allowing our lives to be shaped by the pattern of God's love. This comes through prayer, reading the Bible, worship and fellowship with other Christians. John Wesley called these 'means of grace'. This intake empowers us for action: in sharing our faith, serving our neighbours, and working for justice.

The four elements of *Our Calling* loosely correspond to the inward and outward rhythm of Christian living. **Worship**, together with **Learning and Caring**, are the ways we attend to God and gain our strength and wisdom for **Service** and **Evangelism**. These belong together, as closely as breathing in and out.





It is no good spending all our time in prayer and Bible study if it doesn't affect our everyday lives and the people and the world around us. Equally if we are active all the time, seeking to change the world for the better, and don't pray, reflect or learn, we will eventually run out of the energy we need.

The idea of breathing in and out may be a good way to think about a *Methodist Way of Life*. When I am reflecting on my own Christian life, I ask myself two questions:

- What am I receiving from God?
- How is my faith working in the world?

The answers to these questions provide me with a health check on the balance and rhythm of my Christian living.

SERVICE

The Church exists to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice

- *We will help people in our communities and beyond.*
- *We will care for creation and all God's gifts.*
- *We will challenge injustice.*

We will help people in our communities and beyond

“Who is my neighbour?” was the question a lawyer posed to Jesus. In response, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan – a moving story of a man who acted with compassion towards another who had been attacked and robbed (Luke 10:25-37). The surprise in the story is that the neighbour is neither the person next door nor someone in the village. The shock in the story is that the person showing kindness is Samaritan, a member of a group despised by many Jews.

In using a parable, Jesus shifts the notion of neighbour away from locality to the arena of need, and compassionate action. Anyone you come across might be a neighbour to you. You are being a good neighbour when you help a person in need.

For us, serving our neighbours will be both in the communities where we live or work, but will also include anyone in need who crosses our path. Being a good neighbour can be the simple action of lending a garden tool to the woman next door, or buying the *Big Issue* from your local vendor; befriending a housebound person in your street; talking to someone on a train; volunteering at the local hospice; or lending an ear to a work colleague facing a difficult situation.

Churches have a good record of serving their communities. Church buildings are often meeting places for many community groups. In addition, the church may support coffee mornings, toddler groups, luncheon clubs, uniformed organisations and many other activities. In recent times, churches have provided space for a mobile Post Office when the local Post Office closed. They have added a café, opened soft play centres and established drop-in days for the homeless or unemployed.

We will care for creation and all God's gifts

Service also includes how we use personal and shared resources for good. We are increasingly conscious of the threat to our planet and Christians, alongside many others, are seeking to do the right thing through activities such as recycling, buying fair trade goods, and campaigning for more environmentally friendly ways of living. The earth is a gift from God and we are called to be good stewards of its life (Genesis 2:15).

As Christians we will also want to reflect on how we use the resources we have been given. This includes how we spend our money. Many of us are caught up in the consumerist world of 'buying things'. Some we need – food to eat, clothes to wear, homes to live in, holidays to enjoy – but it is easy to go beyond these necessities to buy things we don't need, or new things when fashions change, throwing away the old. Some people have none of these options and many people are homeless; nevertheless, advertisers continually tell us we will be happier if we buy their product.

With the development of online shopping and social media, which reach us constantly through our phones and computers, we are individually targeted by technology to stir up our desires. Regular reflection on how we spend, what we buy, what we give to charity and what values are forming in us, is helpful as part of our Christian discipleship. Membership of the Iona Community involves giving an account to your group of how you have used money over the last year.

It is also good to abstain from things for a short period, whether that be food, alcohol, shopping, eating meat, watching TV, driving cars or looking at

our phones. Fasting was a feature of early Methodism and the Early Church, primarily so that people could recognise their dependencies and appreciate the good they had and could share. The idea of fasting can be applied to many aspects of our regular life. John Wesley often fasted, or gave up a commodity such as tea, even having his hair cut for a time, donating the money he saved to the poor.

We will challenge injustice

Challenging injustice is never easy – it is rare for a challenge to be welcome. There will always be embedded interests in any system; individuals who benefit from someone else’s unjust treatment. However, Methodists have a long history of challenging injustice and campaigning for change that stretches back over the past four centuries:

- supporting Wilberforce and those seeking to abolish slavery
- working with trade unions campaigning for fair wages and working conditions
- joining the Drop the Debt movement and helping to establish Fair Trade
- supporting refugees and asylum seekers and *The Lies we tell Ourselves* publication, which highlighted the poverty traps of the British welfare system.

Over the centuries Methodists have seen their calling as working for fairness and respect.

Changing people’s attitudes is as important as challenging systems. Wesley not only sought to help the poor, he also challenged perceptions of the poor.

One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorances an excuse for their hardness of heart.

John Wesley ‘On Visiting the Sick’

Thus, challenging injustice needs to be at an individual level. Asking people to consider the language they use about others, especially if it is racist, sexist or homophobic, is important. This is sometimes costly, as I found out when I first confronted someone about their racist language when I worked in a mill in Bradford. I almost got beaten up!

But any challenge must come from a willingness to challenge ourselves; to change our behaviour and language in order to live justly. Challenging someone else should never be from a 'holier than thou' attitude but from a recognition that we are all caught up in a culture which carries injustices of many kinds and that all of us need to change.

Story







Mollie was concerned about modern day slavery but wondered how she could make people more aware of the problem. Together with friends, she did some research and found that the sweatshirts sold in the gift shop of her college were not of the highest ethical standard. They decided to launch a campaign event to influence staff and students, and ran a 24-hour stall to share information about supply chains and the abuse of workers' labour. Hundreds of people signed a petition as a result, and so Mollie and her friends were able to start a conversation with the college about their policies.



Story

At a Methodist Women in Britain event, two hundred women made gifts for their MPs. These were napkins, embroidered with personal messages about the need to ensure that people had enough to eat. These gifts were sent to MPs, along with letters about the harmful impact of Universal Credit on families. Some of the women even hand-delivered them, getting to know their MPs. The women involved learned more about Universal Credit and shared their own stories, and together they increased pressure on MPs around the country.

Exercises

-  Have you ever got involved in a campaign against something you thought to be unjust? What did you do and how did it feel?
-  When have you been helped by a neighbour? What was it that helped?
-  How is your church a good neighbour in your locality? In what ways are you able to help neighbours?
-  What does your church do to care for the environment?
-  Take photos of the area around your church and immediate neighbourhood. Look at the photos. What do you notice?
-  What do you consider to be the most important injustice in our society today? What could you do about it?

EVANGELISM

The Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ

- *We will speak of the love of God.*
- *We will live in a way that draws others to Jesus.*
- *We will share our faith with others.*

Passing on good news is a natural desire. If you have a new baby or grandchild, you tell your friends. If you get a new job or promotion at work, you want to share the news. If you have passed an exam or been selected for a sports team, it is hard to keep it to yourself.

Evangelism is about passing on good news and it flows out of our excitement about what we have discovered, which will help others. One person has described evangelism as ‘one beggar telling another where to get food’.

We will speak of the love of God

Sharing the good news is a joint and an individual responsibility. That is, the Church needs to do it and, as part of that, individuals have a responsibility too. It is never just the minister’s job or simply the preacher’s calling. We all have a part to play. In the youth group which nurtured my faith it was the way other young people (rather than the leaders) spoke of God, and what God meant to them, that drew me deeper into commitment to Christ.

Like ‘challenging injustice’, evangelism is an aspect of living a Christian life that many Christians find difficult. That is not altogether surprising, as our culture has moved from one that was largely sympathetic to religion to be one which is unaware of, dismissive of or even antagonistic towards faith communities. It is hard to speak of personal faith in this environment. We fear that people will see us as odd, or deluded, or both.

We have accepted the cultural view that faith is a ‘private matter’, not something to invite others to consider.

There are some insights that can help us take up our responsibility:

- **Speaking about God often begins when we talk to other Christians about our faith.** This can be encouraged in church by asking someone to tell their faith story in an act of worship. It can also be nurtured in a small group. The publication *Talking of God Together* is designed for this purpose. Once you have begun to talk of God in your own life, it becomes easier and more natural. You become more aware of God at work around you.
- **Witness works most effectively in relationships we already have.** Some people may be able to speak about faith to a total stranger in the supermarket queue or at a bus stop, but for most of us, it is more likely that we will speak of faith to our friends, family or work colleagues. In research conducted in the late 20th century, over 75% of Christians said they came to faith through a friend or relative.
- **Listening to others is key.** Notice how often when people approach Jesus in the Gospels, he invites them to tell him about what it is they want and he listens carefully before responding. Listening conveys respect, as well as allowing us the privilege of hearing their story. It also helps us to engage with other people’s lives and concerns. As a result, it can shape the language we use and hone our sensitivities.
- **Knowing the Christian story helps.** The Greek word used in the New Testament from which we get the word evangelism is *euangelion*. We sometimes translate this word as gospel or good news, as in ‘Matthew’s Gospel’ (or the good news according to Matthew). In fact, Mark’s Gospel opens with the words “the beginning of the *euangelion* (good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” making it clear the story about to be told is good news. Mark is providing for his readers a narrative that recounts the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus so that they can know, and pass on to others, the good news. We don’t have to be

trained theologians to know the story of Jesus, and the story of Jesus is itself good news. You can't assume that people know or have read the story of Jesus. Knowing the story yourself and sharing it with others or encouraging them to read it for themselves may be a good starting point.

- **Being part of a worshipping, caring community shapes us for the task.** God has called the Church to witness to the good news and, as I suggested earlier, in the Church we help each other to become more like Christ. As we follow the practices of a *Methodist Way of Life* we are more able to live in a way that draws people to Jesus. If we are seen to display hospitality and generosity, challenge injustice and care for our neighbours, this will invite people to think about why Christians do these things. Working together on how to communicate the gospel will also help us, as the Church, to be more fruitful in our evangelism. Making plans together for outreach, sharing our successes and failings and supporting each other in prayer will ensure we can witness as well as possible. Your church may organise an enquirers' course such as Alpha. This will need many people to organise, cater, pray, invite, teach, build relationships and give personal testimonies. Combining our experience and skills together can make for a shared witness. It may need many people but it will be worth it!

We will live in a way that draws others to Jesus

The final bullet point above reminds us that the quality of daily living is a powerful means of communicating the faith. As a church community, and as individuals, we often underestimate the power of what we do and say in everyday life to influence and affect others. As Bishop J C Ryle put it:

Our lives will always be either doing good or harm to those who see them. They are a silent sermon which all can read ... far more is done for Christ's kingdom by the holy living of believers than we are aware of.

We will share our faith with others

Speaking about faith with others and living a Christian life are important ways of participating in the evangelistic work of the Church but there are many more ways of sharing faith. In art, posters, writing letters, posting on

Facebook and other social media, even in what you wear. One of my friends has a Methodist lapel badge and regularly gets into conversations about why he wears it. Another friend regularly takes photos on her phone and posts these on Instagram with a simple comment, such as ‘God’s beautiful world’.





Stories

In 2019 Gareth Malone (of *Military Wives* fame) went into a prison to draw together young men to form a choir. At first, no one wanted to volunteer for the choir. The styles of music they associated with choral music were not attractive to them. It felt irrelevant. However, Gareth took time and made a real effort to listen to what was important to these men. Out of many hours of conversation, the men began putting their life stories, reflections, feelings and hopes into poetic rhythm and he helped them to sing these in their own context and language. The results were extraordinary. He was able to create something because he had listened, and everyone was transformed by the experience.

During the pandemic in 2020, Catherine was furloughed from work. She took to taking a daily walk and regularly met a neighbour doing the same. They began to walk together, at a suitable social distance, but able to have a conversation. Over several days, their conversation became deeper and her neighbour asked what she thought about God in this strange time. Catherine was able to share her personal faith and they talked together about some of the hard things to understand in life. Her neighbour is now making another journey, exploring faith for herself with Catherine’s help.



Exercises

-  How did you come to faith? Were there particular people who helped you? In what ways?
-  When do you get opportunities to talk about God in church or in other situations? With whom do you talk about God?
-  What does your church do already to reach out to others with the good news? What other possibilities are there in your community?
-  Are there any particular people you should pray for or invite to consider Christian faith? Make a short list and pray for each person for a week. At the end of the week, reflect on whether there is anything you feel prompted to do?

LIVING A METHODIST WAY OF LIFE

These pages have introduced a *Methodist Way of Life* but the invitation here is to go further and deeper.

On page 41 of this study guide, you will find a list of questions related to the commitments of a *Methodist Way of Life*. If you have worked through the exercises at the end of each section, some will already be familiar. They are questions that invite us to reflect on how we are getting on with living out our chosen way of life.

It is possible to use these questions to reflect on your Christian living by yourself, or in talking with God. This would be a perfectly acceptable way to proceed, but you are more likely to persevere with the commitments if you work with someone else.

When people decide to take up jogging or running, when they diet or when they want to develop a skill, they often find it easier when a friend or companion does it with them. With a *Methodist Way of Life*, having someone to pose the questions for you may mean you are able to respond more fully and more honestly.

This could be a Christian friend, with whom you can ask each other the questions, or as spiritual director or guide. Equally, it could be two or three people who agree to meet for the purpose of reflecting on the questions. I know of one group of three people who meet regularly, every few weeks, to look at one question. Each person responds personally to the question, then they pray for each other and agree which question they will look at next time.

This is what we might call intentional and accountable discipleship. The prayer partners are each committed to becoming a better follower of Jesus and they trust one another to help them on their journey.

Trust and confidentiality are important in this type of relationship. People can only be truly honest when they are sure that what they share is respected and not mentioned outside the group. They also need to know that their companions on the way want the best for them and will continue to pray and support them when life is challenging. If you were to form a group or prayer triplet, you would need to agree on certain things.

Here are some suggestions for working in a small group.

- Show love – seek the best for one another.
- Give thanks – praise God for good news.
- Listen carefully and attentively to others.
- Be honest, but avoid being judgemental.
- Maintain a regular time for meeting.
- Keep confidences – nothing should be passed on except when there is danger to others.

You might call a group like this a ‘Way of Life Covenant Group’. You may even want to work together to draw up a basic covenant to guide your time.

Of course, you may identify other questions, not on the list, that are important to you or particular to your context. Young parents may be concerned about how they are helping their families be shaped in a Christian way. Care workers may want to reflect on how they treat the elderly with dignity in trying circumstances. A group of men I came across asked each other about pornography because all admitted that it had been a part of their lives from which they wanted to get free. The questions supplied in this study guide are a starting or base point.

There are other ways of using a *Methodist Way of Life*:

- One group I know of study different topics together but always repeat the commitments at the end of each session. They may not have looked at any of the questions supplied here; they may have discussed something quite different, but they say the commitments together as their last act, so that they go out into the world with these words fresh in their minds.

- In another setting, people are asked to read through the commitments before they come to the Covenant Service. At the service, they are encouraged to consider what God is calling them to in the year ahead.
- It can also be used in worship as part of the response to the preaching, perhaps before the prayers of intercession.
- Some have found it is a good way of telling others about Methodism. When someone asks: “What are Methodists about?” they are able to hand them a copy of the commitment card, saying: “This tells you what we do”. Similarly, copies can be left in the church entrance with a note saying: “Please take one”.
- It could form the pattern for a quiet day, retreat or church weekend away.
- Some have used the commitments and questions as moments of reflection in church meetings.
- In churches shared with other denominations, they have adopted the Way of Life but given it a local name, such as The Christchurch Way of Life or the Trinity Way of Life.

There are many other ways of using and adapting a *Methodist Way of Life*.

Whatever you do, may God give you grace to live out your calling.

A Methodist Way of Life

A Methodist Way of Life encourages us to grow together.
Make time to discuss these questions regularly with others.

Worship

- What is the pattern of your prayer life?
 - How easy or hard do you find it to pray?
 - What has spoken to you recently in worship or in the Bible?
 - When, lately, have you felt close to God or distant from God?
-

Learning and Caring

- How have you practised generosity since we last met?
 - How have you shown hospitality to others recently?
 - How are you caring for yourself?
 - How and what are you learning now?
-

Service

- How are you seeking to serve others in your communities and beyond?
What has helped or hindered you in your service of others?
 - How are you caring for God's creation?
 - How are you using God's gifts (including your financial resources)?
 - What issues of injustice are you currently concerned about? What are you doing in response?
-

Evangelism

- When was the last time you were able to talk about God?
- What opportunities to share your faith have there been since we last met?
- How have you responded to opportunities to share your faith?
- Is there anyone you might invite to consider Christian faith?

How can we support each other in our Way of Life commitments?

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

A good place to begin to explore more about a *Methodist Way of Life* is on the Methodist Church website. It has a variety of helpful resources including videos, webinars and downloadable materials.

www.methodistchurch.org.uk/MWoL

Rules of Life:

Methodist Diaconal Order

www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-diaconal-order/living-by-a-rule/

Northumbria community:

www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/

Iona Community:

iona.org.uk/movement/the-rule/

Scargill Movement:

scargillmovement.org/community/rule-of-life/



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Elaine A Heath and Larry Duggins, *Missional, Monastic, Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions*. (Cascade Books, 2014)

Andrew Roberts, *Holy Habits*. (Malcolm Down Publishing, 2016)

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Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community* (Abingdon Press, 2002)

Talking of God Together (Methodist Publishing, 2018)

J C Ryle *Holiness* (James Clarke, 1956)

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The **Methodist** Church 