

Sex and Gender

Module

5.1



Equality, Diversity
and Inclusion Toolkit

The **Methodist** Church 



The EDI Toolkit is updated according to a regular schedule. If you see anything you think needs revising, or have any other feedback, please get in touch by contacting equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk

If you would like to request this resource in an alternative format, please contact us to discuss your needs at publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk

REMINDER

The Theological Underpinning of Methodist EDI Work

A document called *Theological Underpinning of Methodist EDI Work* is provided separately. All participants should have a copy of this when they attend their first session. It does not need to be considered in detail every time, but participants should be introduced to it at least once, and made aware that this is the starting point for all our work on EDI issues in the Methodist Church.

Module 5.1

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Introduction

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) toolkit builds on the mandatory EDI training for all those in leadership within the Methodist Church, including Ministers, Stewards, Local Preachers and Worship Leaders, and employed Lay Workers. The mandatory training introduces EDI work within the Methodist Church, including examining the legal context, the role of unconscious bias, and the Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity adopted by the Methodist Conference of 2021. One of the learning objectives of the mandatory training was to “be able to continue personal EDI development through self-directed learning.” The EDI toolkit provides an opportunity to do that through a series of modules which build on the mandatory training. It begins with an Introductory Module, which includes the Theological Underpinning of Methodist EDI Work, and then consists of a series of main modules, of which this is one.

The EDI Toolkit can be used in various ways. It is suitable for any area of church life, including house groups, leadership teams and continuing learning for preachers and worship leaders. This module can be completed as a single session. Alternatively, these materials can be used as a resource to respond to a particular issue. Selected resources or activities from this module could be used or adapted for use in worship or small groups. The materials can also be read by individuals as part of their individual commitment to EDI learning.

How long does it take?

The module can be used in various ways, and you will need to adapt the timings according to your group and context. However, if you are completing this module in one 90-minute session, you may find these suggested timings useful:

Welcome	Worship	EXPLORE	APPLY and REFLECT	EXTEND and preparation for next session	Worship
5 mins	10 mins	20 mins	45 mins	Minimal	10 mins

Pastoral concerns

This session was designed, as far as possible, to encourage full participation of all those attending. The facilitator needs to be aware that people may be reluctant to contribute, perhaps because of personal experience of discrimination, bullying or prejudice. We would therefore recommend that you encourage participants to respect one another – particularly respecting confidentiality (where it does not infringe on good safeguarding protocol).

There may be a danger of some participants dominating the discussion if they have a lot to say. We therefore encourage you to circulate the discussion groups if you think this will help. You could also introduce different facilitation tools, such as using a 'speaking object' (like a ball, talking stick etc) or allowing people to write feedback as well as verbalising it. This can maximise opportunities for all to participate.

Finally, there is also a risk that some people participating in this session will be upset by the topic under discussion. The sensitivity of the subject needs to be acknowledged at the start of the session and participants need to be aware of the different ways in which they can seek support to help deal with issues – both during the session and afterwards. Whilst it is important, as outlined above, that participants have equal opportunities to speak if they wish, this should always be optional.

You may want to have a separate space for worship, which could also be used as reflective space if anyone needs to take time out. You should also consider Chaplaincy provision, during the event if possible or afterwards if necessary. Your district or local EDI Officer may be able to assist you in sourcing appropriate Chaplaincy provision.

Equality Impact Assessments

The Methodist Church has published an Equality Impact Assessment at: methodist.org.uk/inclusive-church/EIA

This is a way of reviewing the things we do now and those we plan to do in the future. This process helps ensure that our

practices are fair and inclusive, and that no individual or group of people is inadvertently disadvantaged. This enables us to anticipate and remove or reduce any negative impact.

The EDI Toolkit is designed to help us learn about a range of issues that can affect people within our fellowship and society. But learning is not sufficient. We also need action, to change our processes and procedures to ensure church meets everyone's needs including those who do not attend. The Equality Impact Assessment also prompts us to think inclusively. We may have a brilliant idea that will meet the needs of some people in our church or community. Collaboratively completing an Equality Impact Assessment ensures a range of different voices are involved in planning and decision making, so that all people are taken into account in our activities.

Opening worship

God of Eve and God of Mary
Singing the Faith 119

In Christ there is no longer male and female
Galatians 3:23-29

Prayer

Help us, O God, never to fill the finite space between the divine and the human with anything less than yourself. Save us from all false absolutes and grant that we may find our consolation in you alone, wherein our finite lives are blessed with the infinity of your love; this we ask through Jesus Christ.

Amen.

(Simone Weil 1909-1943)

EXPLORE

1 Introduction

The aim of this module is to consider how gender and sex discrimination limits both society and the Church. Our approach here is to learn from other people's stories while thinking about our own experiences of sexism and gender discrimination. We must also consider those points in church life where we need to be particularly aware of the impact of sexism and gender discrimination. But first it is important to understand what sex and gender are.

The World Health Organisation's definition of sex and gender

What do we mean by 'sex' and 'gender'?

Sometimes it is hard to understand exactly what is meant by the term 'gender', and how it differs from the closely related term 'sex'. The World Health Organisation provides definitions of sex and gender:

'Sex' refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.

'Gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. These vary from society to society.

What does that mean?

Put simply, 'sex' is about our anatomy, and 'gender' is about how we express ourselves in terms of masculinity and femininity. Ideas of what is masculine and feminine vary a great deal from society to society, within societies and even from person to person. So, importantly, people are not defined by their sex. It should be noted that some people have the physical characteristics of both male and female and there are people who are transgender – ie they have the anatomy of one sex at birth, which may be inconsistent with how they feel about their gender, or the gender of their brain.

Sex and gender are, therefore, complex areas of social science – but it is inaccurate to make assumptions about people’s skills, aptitudes and preferences based on sex or gender. In other words, individuals should be recognised for who they are, not who they are assumed to be because of their sex or gender.

Individuals of all genders and sexes can face discrimination based on stereotypes and assumptions. However, as many societies have developed to favour men and masculine behaviour, it is the case that gender/sex discrimination is experienced disproportionately by women.

Christianity, as with most other world religions, has assigned leadership and power privilege to men over women, and emphasised masculine imagery and language to describe God. There is more diverse language and imagery in the Bible, and there has been reinterpretation of specific texts that proscribe aspects of female speech and behaviour in relation to men and in church. Even where the Church’s official view has changed – as regards the ordination of women with equal status to men – this does not always follow through in practice.

In the EXTEND section of this module, there is opportunity for further reading on the development of gender justice within Methodism. Today, the British Methodist Church affirms the equality of women and men in the life and ministry of the Church and that both men and women should be equally recognised for their gifts. However, owing to underlying social and cultural issues, the reality often falls far short of the aspiration for gender equality.

2 Activity, Art and image

As a group, consider the four works of art from the Methodist Modern Art Collection (see Appendix). What do these works say to you about gender? Look especially at 2 and 4, and think about how these challenge gender stereotypes.

Learning point

Hopefully this 'art and image' exercise helped you to think of some different ways that Christians use to imagine and understand God. The images may speak to you in different ways and can both emphasise familiar ideas (perhaps in pictures 1 and 3) or challenge us to think in new ways (as in 2 and 4). The image of God presented in the Bible is diverse – using both the masculine and the feminine. What does it mean, therefore, for humankind to be made in God's image?

3 The journey to date

Women have been accredited as local preachers since the early days of Methodism, and in 1928 the Methodist Conference appointed a Committee to report on the question of the admission of women to ordained ministry.

In 1933 the Methodist Conference accepted the report 'Women and the Ministry' which stated that "there is no function of the ordained ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex" (Minutes, 1933, p. 438).

The first female presbyters were ordained in 1974. This was a year before the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) in the UK. It was a significant breakthrough for the ordination of women not only in the Methodist Church, but also for those of our ecumenical partners who had not by then made the step.

In 1987 the Revd Kathleen Richardson was appointed the first woman to be a chair of district.

In 1992 the Revd Kathleen Richardson was elected as President of the Methodist Conference, the first woman to hold the post.

In 1992 the 'Inclusive Language and Images of God' report was adopted by the Methodist Conference. It said that:

- 1) The use of 'inclusive language' and the exploration of female imagery in our speaking of God should be strongly encouraged.

- 2) Preachers and leaders of worship should remember how language helps to mould our thinking and attitudes and that we should, therefore, seek to avoid the use of 'exclusive' language which reinforces ideas and attitudes incompatible with Christian belief in the equal standing of women and men.
- 3) Ways should be explored of raising awareness of the issues discussed in this report throughout the Church – eg through questions on official agendas, through 'language workshops' etc.

In 1995 the report 'A Cry of the Beloved' was brought to the Methodist Conference by the Commission on Women Presbyters and the Church. This group was established as a response to the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of the first women presbyters in the Methodist Church. The Conference resolved to:

- celebrate the contributions made by all women within the life of the Church
- recognise the love and support given to many women presbyters by Methodist people and others
- recognise the pain experienced by women presbyters and so urge all Methodist people to allow women presbyters to make their own contributions to the development of real community in the Church's life.

In 2000 the Gender Justice Committee was established to facilitate the Church's tasks of addressing institutional sexism and raising gender awareness across the whole of the Methodist Church in Britain.

APPLY and REFLECT

1 Case studies

This section contains case studies for your consideration.

In small groups, consider at least two of the following stories, but as many as time will allow.

Each of these is a true story, although names and some details have been changed to maintain anonymity. They were provided by the individuals concerned and so reflect their choice of language to describe their story.

At the end of each story, there are questions for you to consider. It may be helpful to refer back to the SCIP classification in the Introductory Module. Here is a headline reminder of the SCIP classification:

- Structural – eg legal and political structures, policies, committees, etc
- Cultural – the cultural norms of a group or society, commonly held views
- Institutional – practices, how things are done
- Personal – personal behaviours and practices.

At the end of each story there are questions for you to consider. Reflect also, as you read, on what the key words, emotions and issues are for the person in the story and for you.

Peter's story

Peter was born into a very large family, the oldest boy with five sisters. Throughout his life he had been not just a brother, but a mother, father and friend. With such a large family, it went without question that he helped out his mother and sisters. From an early age Peter would set up Sunday school in the kitchen and read from the children's Bible, then get his sisters to draw pictures, which they all loved. This pattern continued until all the children became adult.

At church Peter decided to put himself forward to teach Sunday school, as this is where he saw his calling within the church.

He approached the minister to discuss this but was told because of safeguarding reasons, they had decided that the Sunday school teachers would only be women, as parents were uncomfortable with men in this role. It was suggested that instead of Sunday school, he should work in the youth club with the football team. Peter was quite upset by this response and felt saddened that the minister's decision was wrong. However, he decided not to challenge it as he had already been made to feel bad for suggesting working at the Sunday school in the first place.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions were made about Peter because he is a man?
- If you were told that 'for safeguarding reasons' you couldn't do something, how would you feel?
- Have similar assumptions been made in your church?

Learning

- What could have been done differently in this story?

Action

- How would you and your church ensure that it could use the skills and expertise of someone, regardless of their gender?
- How would you inform people about gender equality?

Ruth's story

Ruth, 22, was born in a male body but knew from the age of 16 that she was female. Ruth came from a long line of Methodists who were proud and active members of the Church and she had played an active role within her local church all of her life. Ruth tried to confide her feelings to her family and members of the church but these were shrugged off as adolescent confusion. Her minister said that things would be clearer once she met someone and settled down. This advice did not help Ruth, who reacted by withdrawing. Though she wanted to attend church, she felt that she had been rejected.

Eventually, Ruth decided that she could no longer live a lie and resolved to go down the medical route to transition to become

female. This was not an easy decision. When she told her parents about this, they just could not understand and throughout the procedures they kept telling her that it was OK to change her mind. They were torn between her choice and their love, so much so that they even asked the church members to pray for a change of heart. In the end Ruth decided to leave home, the area she was born and raised and the Church. She saw this as her only hope of a more content and happy life. She needed to be somewhere where she was accepted for who she was. Ruth has started to attend church in another area far from where she was born, though she has not confided in anyone. She feels more at peace and less judged.

Questions

Experience

- How does Ruth's story make you feel?

Learning

- What were the main reasons that Ruth could not stay in her old church?

Action

- Would there be support in your church if someone identified as transgender?
- What could you and your church do to support someone like Ruth in their gender identity?

Olu's story

Olu was born in the UK to a family of refugees who had fled civil war. On arrival, the Methodist Church had been instrumental in helping her family to settle in their local community. Though Olu had times both at church and in her daily life when it was presumed that she was 'foreign', she felt confident in her identity and her ability to challenge unwelcome comments. Where she felt more vulnerable was as a woman, as comments about her 'rightful place' came from friends and family as well as strangers.

When Olu became a presbyter not everyone in the Church agreed that a

woman should take on this role. It was suggested by a few that she should perhaps be a deacon as this was a role more suited for women. Once stationed, she found that at times she was sidelined and not included, or that people did not want to see her because she was a woman. The worst example of this treatment was at a meeting of ministers from other denominations, who refused to talk to or acknowledge her on the basis that women should not be in ministry. When she complained to her superintendent, he said that there was nothing he could do.

Questions

Experience

- Who has let down Olu in this story?
- Have you noticed or experienced anything similar, perhaps in your church or one that you know?

Learning

- What could the superintendent have done differently in this story?

Action

- How would you and your church ensure that women are actively supported in their ministry?
- How would you inform people about gender equality?

Karen's story

Karen had been asked on a number of occasions over a number of stations to think about becoming a superintendent. She had thought about it long and hard, but each time she came back to the same old thoughts that not only was the role male-dominated, but it was expected that the superintendent would be domineering, which was just not her style. It was not until she was stationed with a woman

superintendent that Karen felt she had found a role model at last who could help her to rethink how she too could do the role. Her superintendent was supportive and persuasive, encouraging her to realise her potential. Karen is now an active and engaging superintendent, committed to her work and to ensuring that women have equal access to role models.

Questions

Experience

- What were Karen's reasons, initially, for not wanting to be a superintendent?

Learning

- What were the traditional images of leadership in Karen's mind?
- What, if anything, do you think is different about Karen's leadership?

Action

- How would you and your church ensure that women are actively supported in their ministry?
- How would you support women or men to explore different styles of leadership?

James' story

From an early age James had a love of the arts. Despite suffering verbal and physical abuse as a child, he retained the determination to become a performance artist. After a successful career as a performer, James felt the call to ordained ministry and began the process of becoming a minister.

Despite being in a church institution, James suffered verbal abuse from those around him, including his tutors. James found his sexuality questioned

even though he is heterosexual. This has continued within church communities, with members of staff commenting that, "we're so glad you're married, otherwise we'd be worried!"

The prejudices and behaviour of those he has encountered have felt to James like shadows looming over him, bringing sadness and gloom and leaving him feeling worthless. Most hurtful has been that this behaviour has been within the Church, where all should be welcomed.

Questions

Experience

- Why did people question James' sexuality? What sort of gender assumptions were they making?

Learning

- How did other people's attitudes affect James?
- Could such attitudes exist in your church or in situations you know about?

Action

- How could you challenge gender stereotyping appropriately?
- What sort of support is there/could there be in your church?

2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to the interconnectedness of our social characteristics: our ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and so on. These overlap and create interdependent systems of discrimination and advantage. Being aware of intersectionality means we can better acknowledge and understand the differences among us.

There is no hierarchy of protected characteristics. There is no hierarchy of discrimination. Different forms of discrimination and exclusion will affect different people in different ways and at different times, but no single characteristic is more central to our experience of being human. Within the Methodist Church, we aim to go beyond the protected characteristics of the Equality Acts of Great Britain and the Isle of Man; the Discrimination (Jersey) Law; the Prevention of Discrimination (Guernsey) Ordinance; and the Equal Opportunities Act in Gibraltar. Instead, we consider all power dynamics within the church, such as socio-economic factors and the relationships between lay and ordained. In all our relationships and processes, we seek justice; for all to be treated with dignity; and to stand in solidarity with those who have experienced discrimination or exclusion.

None of our characteristics are lived in a vacuum. We all have a range of other personal and social attributes that affect our lived experiences. Therefore, each of our lived experiences will be unique.

For example, all women will have different experiences of being a woman. Some will be transgender and others cisgender. Some will be heterosexual and others homosexual or bisexual. For some, motherhood may be a crucial part of their experience of womanhood. Others will not have been mothers; for some this will have been by choice whereas for others this situation comes with a very profound sense of loss. The impact of living in a patriarchal society will vary considerably between women of different ages, of different socio-economic class, or for women who have experienced living in different countries or communities. Power dynamics relating to ethnicity will mean women will have different levels of social privilege with which to resist misogyny.

These are just a few examples, and we cannot possibly consider all the different experiences people have of being a woman. The important thing is to be mindful that being a woman is experienced in many ways, and to always consider how different personal and social characteristics intersect to form our unique lived experiences. The same applies to men, non-binary and genderless people too. We therefore cannot make assumptions and should always listen to and learn from the experiences of others.

We are all made in the image of God, across all our differences. Together in our diversity we make up the Body of Christ. So, as we learn more about one another, we draw closer to Christ. Becoming more aware of intersectionality helps us to do this.

If you know of a story that may help improve the diversity of experiences within the case studies in this module, or would be willing to share your own story, please contact [**equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk**](mailto:equality&diversity@methodistchurch.org.uk)

3 Summary and questions

Thinking about your answers to the questions and issues raised in the case studies, take time now to reflect on:

- what you have learnt
- what the stories might mean in your church
- what you will do.

Summary

- People's skills, abilities and talents are not defined by their gender.
- Traditional ways of thinking and speaking, including how we think of God, favour men.
- Methodism has clearly stated that men and women are equal in all aspects of Church life – even though the reality does not always match the aspiration.
- The Bible gives us a range of 'images' and ways of speaking and thinking about God, including both masculine and feminine.

Questions

Experience

- What assumptions are there in your church about leadership and gender?

Learning

- How does gender discrimination impact on individuals and on the mission of the church?
- Is there a particular culture of leadership within the church that promotes or inhibits gender equality?

Action

- What support groups are there in your church? Are there opportunities for new groups to form?
- Are there gender-specific roles in your church? How can we ensure that roles are inclusive? What could you and your church do to ensure gender equality?

EXTEND

For further study or personal reflection. Keep for use with other modules.

Contents

1. Inclusive Language and Imagery about God
(Conference report from 1992, abridged)
 - Introduction
 - Exclusive language and the image of God
 - The language of worship
 - God as man
 - Scripture
 - God the Father
 - Re-evaluation of language in the Bible
 - Male-centred assumptions in Scripture
 - Metaphor
 - Prayer and worship

1 Inclusive Language and Imagery about God (1992)

Excerpts from the 1992 Conference report of the same name.

Please note that to aid in reading the text, parts have been abridged and summarised and discussion sections have been added.

Introduction

Language is a precious gift from God. Ill-chosen language may both express and encourage attitudes that are unworthy or beliefs that are inadequate or false. When we 'name' reality, we can so easily define it on our own terms.

God is neither male nor female. Whilst male and female are together made in the divine image, our understanding of God has been in some respects impoverished by the exclusive use of male imagery, and in the balance and tension between male and female imagery a richer vision of God is given.

Exclusive language and the image of God

Until recently, 'exclusive language' was very widely used in Britain and only rarely questioned. By 'exclusive' language we mean 'male' words such as 'man', 'men', 'mankind' or 'forefathers', used to refer to both males and females.

In The Methodist Service Book, published in 1975, such language is used throughout. There are prayers for 'all men' even though we intend to include women and children.

We declare that 'man' is made in God's image, even though the divine image is seen equally in women; we confess that we have sinned against our 'fellow men' even though we sin at least as much against women and children. Women may thus become 'linguistically invisible'. Children likewise may become 'invisible' through the use of this language.

It is sometimes argued that objections to such language rest on a failure to see that words such as 'man' have two meanings. 'Man' may be used to refer to a male human being, and also to all human beings in general. There is a measure of truth in this objection, but it still misses the main

points. One significant reason why 'male' words have been so used in our language has been the widely held belief that the male is the human norm. Furthermore, apart from this consideration, this usage is increasingly heard as being exclusive, and when this is so it is inadequate simply to refer people to a dictionary. After all language develops and meanings change. This remains true even though 'exclusive' language is often both used and heard quite innocently by those who understand it to refer to both women and men. The universal reference, without any 'sexist' connotations, is immediately understood. For many who believe in the equality and full humanity of male and female, however, the continued use of exclusive male language is an anachronism which fails to express their belief. Finally, even if the word 'man' may be understood as referring to both women and men this is not so readily the case with words such as 'brotherhood', 'forefathers', and also the plural 'men'.

However, the fundamental issue is not our response to current trends and pressures but rather the nature of the gospel and our Christian conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God.

Question: If 'male is the norm', what are the issues when describing human beings?

Did you know: that there are more words for males than for females in English and that more of these words are positive. Many words for women have negative connotations, even where they are comparable to the male word – ie 'spinster' and 'bachelor'.

If we follow the idea of male as the norm, then what are women? Does this make them invisible or sub-male?

Question: How is your image of God shaped by the language you use about God?

The language of worship

These issues are relevant to all kinds of speech but never more relevant than when we are considering the language of worship. Special care should be given to such language because our language in worship not only expresses but also moulds our theology during an activity when our minds and emotions should be fully alert.

In worship, as on other occasions, we transmit values through language. 'Christians are formed by the way in which they pray, and the way they choose to pray expresses what they are.' It is imperative that the Church should reflect critically on the language it uses. Those who lead worship should remember how alienating to some can be the constant use of words such as 'men', 'mankind', 'brethren', 'forefathers' etc. Such language can also reinforce beliefs about the normative character of the male.

Question: Think of a time when the language that was being used as part of worship made you feel left out. How did it feel?

God as man

There is evidence that some people think of God as being in some sense 'male'. Perhaps this is in part due to the influence of the male imagery that we widely use, and in part due to the belief that God was incarnate in the male Christ. The belief that God is in some sense male lacks coherence – since it is unclear what might be meant by speaking of God as male. After all, God has no physical body. Despite its incoherence, this belief remains strong in some quarters.

It remains true, however, that much of the language about God most widely used by Christians does have a gender; and this is almost invariably male. Certainly in general 'church-speak' God is described as 'Lord', 'King' and 'Father', more frequently than in most other ways. It is difficult to deny that our understanding of God has been significantly influenced by the dominance of male and masculine imagery. Sometimes our culture's male stereotypes have been projected onto God.

Question: How has your understanding of God been influenced by masculine imagery?

Scripture

All Christians accept the authority of Scripture, even though they may differ in their understanding of the nature of this authority. They may also differ over how Scripture is to be interpreted and used. We begin by asking about the witness of Scripture concerning our theme.

First we note that the Bible does speak of God in terms of female imagery. Isaiah uses a woman's experience of nurturing her children as a metaphor of the divine care (Isaiah 46:3-4). A similar image is used in Deuteronomy 32:18

"You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." (NRSVue)

In Isaiah 42:14 God is also compared to a woman who cries in labour:

"Now I will cry out like a woman in labour; I will gasp and pant." (NRSVue)

Elsewhere we read in Isaiah 66:13:

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." (NRSVue)

Another verse in Isaiah does not speak directly of God by using female imagery. It is nonetheless worth quoting as an example of the prophet's willingness to compare and contrast the care of God with that of a mother for her child:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these might forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15, NRSVue)

The Psalmist speaks of our relationship to God as being:

"like a weaned child with its mother." (Psalm 131:2, NRSVue)

In spite of these examples the Bible usually speaks of God in male terms. This may be partly because of assumptions about the priority of the male, and partly in order to maintain

a sense of separateness from their religious contemporaries who sometimes worshipped female gods.

The way in which God is usually spoken of in Scripture has led some Christians to believe that the biblical imagery about God is invariably, inescapably and normatively, male. Whereas others claim that the Bible is inherently 'male centred' (or 'patriarchal') and legitimises patriarchal power and oppression. It is therefore alien to those who insist upon the fundamental equality of women and men. Both of these positions, quite apart from other considerations, neglect the place that female imagery does have in Scripture.

Question: How do you relate to those people who view Scripture and the image of God differently from you?

God the Father

Even though God is sometimes spoken of in Scripture in terms of female images, the image that is central in the New Testament (although it is sparingly used in the Old) is that of Father. We need, though, to ask what is meant by speaking of God as Father. The metaphor does not imply that God is male. It is rather the parenthood of God that is implicit.

The biblical writings themselves point beyond the text to God who is greater. Isaiah insists that nothing can be likened to God (55:9). God is one whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and ways higher than our ways.

This does not prevent the prophet from using a rich range of images. But they are all inadequate and subject to being superseded, or corrected and balanced, by others.

Question: Understanding God as an intimate and loving parent, what image of fatherhood is Jesus using when he speaks of his Father and our Father (John 20:17)?

Re-evaluation of language in the Bible

In the New Testament we find evidence of a selective use of traditional language in Paul's tendency to avoid 'Israel-centred' expressions, such as 'the God of Jacob'. So within

the Bible itself, there is evidence that language about God was subject to re-evaluation, and not fixed for all time.

We are encouraged in this by the fact that the Bible speaks of God by appealing to a great variety of images. This includes some significant female imagery. The biblical writers implicitly invite their readers to do the same.

Question: What other shifts in language are you aware of in the Bible? And what other changes of imagery have you noticed/used in church – eg through hymns and prayers?

Male-centred assumptions in Scripture

In Genesis it is declared that men and women are both made in the divine image (Genesis 1:27). There is much in the ministry and teaching of Jesus that affirms women. Ephesians 5:25-29, often quoted to support the 'headship' of men over women, is perhaps better seen as an example of an early Christian writer struggling to reassess the man-woman relationship in the light of our new life in Christ. What is impressive about the passage is not the way it confirms 'male-centred' beliefs. It is rather the extent to which it manages to break free from them. This is through its stress on mutuality and the obligation of the husband to love and cherish his wife. 1 Corinthians 11 is a further example of a passage which illustrates the tension between the new and the old as Paul struggles to bring out the innovative implications of the gospel within the confines of an inherited understanding. It is untrue to say that the Bible is unqualifiedly 'male-centred' in its assumptions. It rather contains a tension, often implicit, sometimes explicit, between 'male-centred' structures and assumptions and the insight that in Christ there is "no longer male and female" (Galatians 3:28).

We conclude that the use of female imagery is compatible with faithfulness to Scripture – indeed, that Scripture itself points in this direction, and also gives us examples of such imagery. In other words there is no incompatibility between language about God which is both 'catholic', in the sense of appealing to all and embracing all, including male and female, and 'apostolic', in the sense of keeping faith with its origins.

Question: In what ways do we still see a tension today between male structures and the gender-inclusive Bible passages?

Metaphor

It is consistent with this that there is nothing inherently more appropriate about male as opposed to female imagery in our speaking of God. Our images of God must not become idols. If it is allowed that the father image is but an image, and if God is not male, then it is hardly consistent to insist that God must be spoken of in only male terms and in terms drawn only from the experience and role of MEN.

If all our language about God is the language of metaphor and analogy, we need a rich variety of images. Language is a human creation. Especially when speaking of God, it is inadequate for its subject matter.

Our experience of being human gives us some clue as to the nature of God. Our language about God makes sense because that which we attribute to God (eg mercy, love, etc) often has echoes in our own experience. It follows that we should feel encouraged to take into account all human experience; female as well as male. Furthermore, we need constantly to be aware of the extent to which the image of God in ourselves has been distorted. We must ask therefore if, when MAN has made God in HIS own image, it has been in terms of the distorted male image rather than in the richer image seen in women and men together. We find that our human experience gives some clue to the nature of God and it is more fruitful if we take into account the experience of both women and men. [Note: the report was written in 1992. Now we would include a broader awareness of gender diversity, such as transgender, gender non-conformity and intersex status.]

If God is portrayed as exclusively male, then God will be readily portrayed in terms of our cultural idea of what a male is expected to be. The patriarchal God will be one who behaves like the patriarchal* male. However, there is another side to the truth – that God in patience and humility steps back from creation, and 'lets be'. God respects the autonomy

of creation, and acts less like a dictator, however benevolent, and more through the evocative power of a love which awaits a free response.

[*Patriarchal, means 'rule or power of fathers'. It is a power system that does not recognise the equality of men and women, or the equality of different generations.]

In a similar way, women experience powerlessness and vulnerability often more acutely and more frequently than do men, or at least men who write books and influence thinking. Perhaps in the act of creation and in giving freedom and relative independence to creation God has chosen to curtail something of the divine sovereignty; and in the act of loving and caring God chooses to be involved in the fortunes of creation, and thus willingly to become vulnerable. Maybe women's experience and female imagery can speak to us of the powerlessness and vulnerability of God.

Creation for God is not the male once-and-for-all act. It is more like the carrying, giving birth, feeding, caring and nurture that we associate with the female. God as Mother gives birth to creation, then a more intimate link between God. Stereotypes can be cruelly restricting, preventing people from realising that full and equivalent personhood which we possess as male and female.

Question: What different words and images could we use to describe God? How can we use language to imagine God as both powerful and powerless, almighty and vulnerable?

Prayer and worship

We have argued there are no theological objections to addressing God as Mother, and many good reasons for doing so. We should of course use the gender pronoun 'he' when referring to Jesus Christ since Christ was a man. It is the full and perfect humanity of Christ that is significant, and we believe that language about Christ should give emphasis to this, rather than to his maleness.

Closing worship

The Persistent Widow

Imagine if God, in this parable, is inspiring the widow (or perhaps is her), demanding justice. Luke 18:1-8

Prayer

We pray for wisdom to discern those traditions which are still relevant and valuable, and for strength to let go of those which hinder the gospel for the twenty-first century, in the name of Jesus, our contemporary.

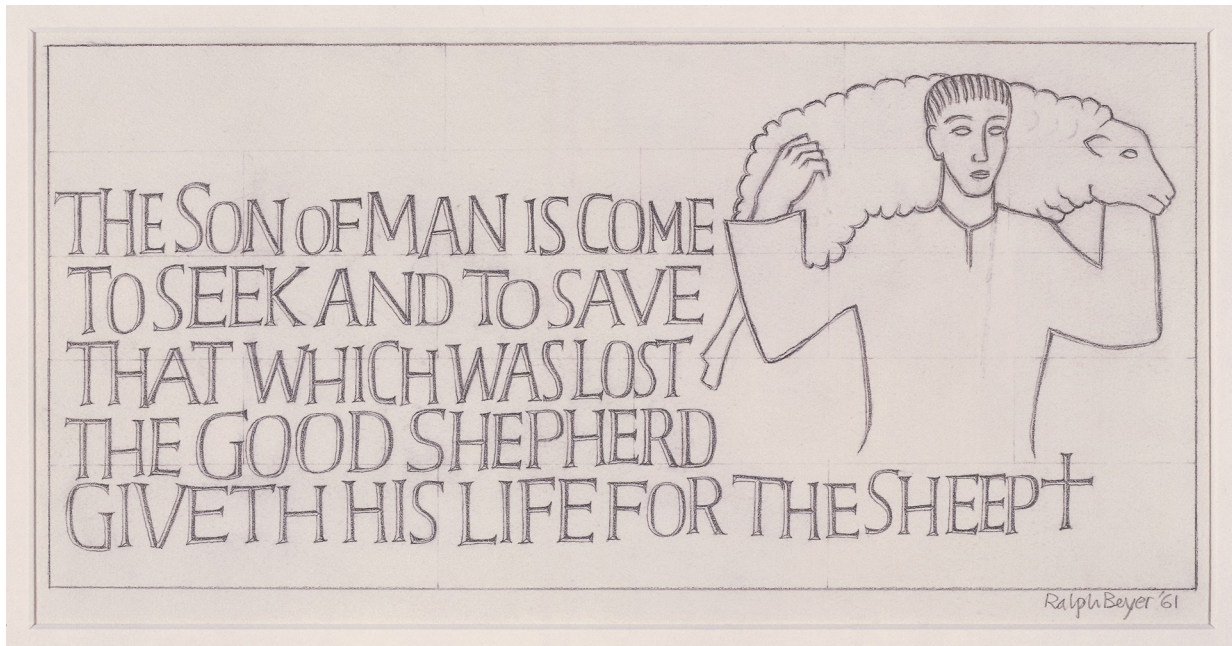
Amen.

(Margaret Day)

She sits like a bird brooding on the waters
Singing the Faith 393

Appendix – Activity, Art and image

Image 1 – Son of Man



The son of man is come
Ralph Beyer (1921-2008)
Pencil
1961
Methodist Collection of Modern Christian Art

Image 2 – Holy Communion



Holy Communion predella
Francis Hoyland (b 1930)
Oil
1961
Methodist Collection of Modern Christian Art

Image 3 – Dalit Madonna



Dalit Madonna
Jyoti Sahi (b 1944)
Oil
c 2000
Methodist Collection of Modern Christian Art

Image 4 – Pink Crucifixion



Pink crucifixion
Craigie Aitchison (1926-2009)
Etching on paper
2004
Methodist Collection of Modern Christian Art

Note: In Victorian Britain, pink was for boys, and blue for girls. Contrast this with modern ideas about gender, sexuality, language and colour, which have evolved during the twentieth century.