



Session Two Transcripts Language, Listening and Hearing

When any of us encounters God, reads the Bible or reflects on discipleship, it doesn't take place in a vacuum. Our faith and understanding of God, our response to God, is shaped by who we are.

Our experiences, what we know, our background, the relationships we've had and communities of which we've been a part, all affect our actions and beliefs. In any Christian community there will be a range of experiences, and different perspectives about who God is and what God wants us to be and do.

The Methodist Church has always paid attention to experience when seeking to deepen its understanding of God, and in recent years it has learnt to listen more intentionally and to pay attention to the variety of different experiences and ways of knowing God within and beyond our church communities.

In any thinking and talking about God, whose experience is being privileged, and what assumptions are being made?

The ways in which God is understood and spoken of impacts on human relationships.

I imagine that you are only too aware of how some terrible things have been carried out 'in the name of God'; of how people who have abused within church contexts have often used distorted interpretations of biblical texts or theological themes to justify their behavior, and of how some theological ideas have contributed to unhealthy and sometimes abusive patterns of relating and have caused deep harm. For example, how might some of the language of sacrifice and suffering be heard by those who have experienced abuse?

In all of this, how the Bible is used and understood is vital.

The Bible is a collection of books formed in different times and places and cultures, from which we are very far removed. When reading and seeking to understand we are always engaging in an act of interpretation, not least in working out how it relates to life today.

Within the Methodist Church it is acknowledged that there are different approaches to Scripture and it is accepted that there are various models of biblical interpretation. While the Bible contains many stories of liberation and hope, Christians must also wrestle with passages that seem to support discrimination and oppression and have been used to justify abuse in different forms. And there are some horrific stories predominantly about the abuse of women.

So, how do we engage with those in a responsible way?

Within the Bible itself there are contradictions and different views. For example the first three chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the very beginning of our inherited text, have often been used for exploring God's purposes for relationships between men and women – but if you read those chapters then it raises the question of which verses you prioritise. In Genesis 1:26-28 the creation of man and woman is referred to in the same instant and the same way; and yet in Genesis 2:18-25 there is a differentiation which has sometimes been interpreted as expressing a secondary, 'helping' role for women.

So which do we prioritise, and what effect does that have?

Similarly, the language and images we use in our worship, in our prayers and in our conversations says something about God, and this also impacts on our relating and flourishing. For example, if we predominantly use language and imagery about God that is male and at the same time talk about a God that is all powerful, what effect does that have on our understanding of being made in God's image and where we then place authority in human relationships?

The language we use can speak of the richness of God but never capture God's fullness. Words and phrases that we may take for granted may affect different people in different

ways and our commonly held assumptions may leave some people feeling marginalised, unheard and rejected. We are encouraged to listen to their experiences, to understand why a beloved hymn or song or prayer, for example, might be for them experienced very differently, and to find out, instead, what kind of language gives life and hope.

Good Communication A Place for Hope

Katie Bradley

Communication is a part of good relationships. But how do we listen to people well?

Take a moment to imagine an elephant with six people around it. To the person beside the leg, the elephant looks like a pillar. To the person who's around the back, it looks like a rope. That's the tail. And the person who's standing by the ear sees a fan waving. The question is, who is right? Well, they're all right. Each of them has their own perspective.

No matter the situation we are in. We all have our own perspective on what's been said or done or experienced. We can't assume that everybody thinks or feels the same way. And remembering this is the first step to good listening.

When we encounter somebody else, each of us may come with an expectation of what we want or what we need, but we don't know what the other person's perspective or position is. Think about that like an iceberg. We can only see the tip, but there's a lot going on underneath the surface.

I once shared an office with a woman who was 25 years older than me, and we had daily arguments about whether the window should be open or closed, or whether the radiator should be on or off. This escalated to the point where we were turning it up and down passively aggressively when the other person wasn't in the room.

She wanted the window open, I wanted the window closed. And I just couldn't understand why she wasn't listening to me.

So one day I asked her if we could talk about it and if she would share with me what the problem was for her and I could tell her what my problem was. I listened to my colleague and I discovered that she wanted to be able to control the temperature because she was having hot flashes. Once I knew this, I was able to start exploring options with her and we found a solution that worked for everybody.

Now you might not always know the 'why'. This is particularly true when we're thinking about survivors who may not want to disclose their experience with you readily or may not be able to articulate it. It's just a feeling of discomfort or that something is not safe.

There is always a reason or a story behind every behaviour that you see. And it's just as important to listen to what's not being said, as well as to what's being said, and try to avoid making any assumptions.

Listening can be surprisingly difficult. So much of the time we bring our own preconceived ideas or judgements and that makes it really hard to actually hear what's being said. Listening actively is different to listening to the words being spoken. It's about willing to be changed and to have your mind changed by what you're hearing.

The first step is to notice how often when someone's talking to you that you're actually framing what you're going to say next. Active listening is when we empty ourselves of the thoughts that are in our head and fully listen to the other person. That means stilling the voice in your own head, focusing on the person speaking without making judgements, and resisting the urge that we all have to offer advice.

When you're listening actively, just remember your body language. Make sure that the other person knows that they have your full attention.

Another thing that's really helpful is to check in and ask a question to make sure that you understand what's really being said. For example, I could have said to my colleague, the temperature of the room is really important to you because when it gets too hot, you're getting uncomfortable.

Not only does this give you the opportunity to make sure that you're understanding what you're being told, but that the other person really feels heard.

Active listening requires us to be aware that other people can see situations very differently from us and that there are reasons behind the different behaviours that we see. By actively listening to what's being said or not said, by being prepared to change our assumptions and to understand each other better, we can create more welcoming churches.

Publisher's Note: Scripts may not be exactly as spoken in the films, but are always substantively so.

If you have any questions or comments about the God Welcomes All course, please contact gwa@methodistchurch.org.uk