

In Dialogue

Striving for Justice

Journeying with the Methodist Church in Britain

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Methodist Church in Great Britain

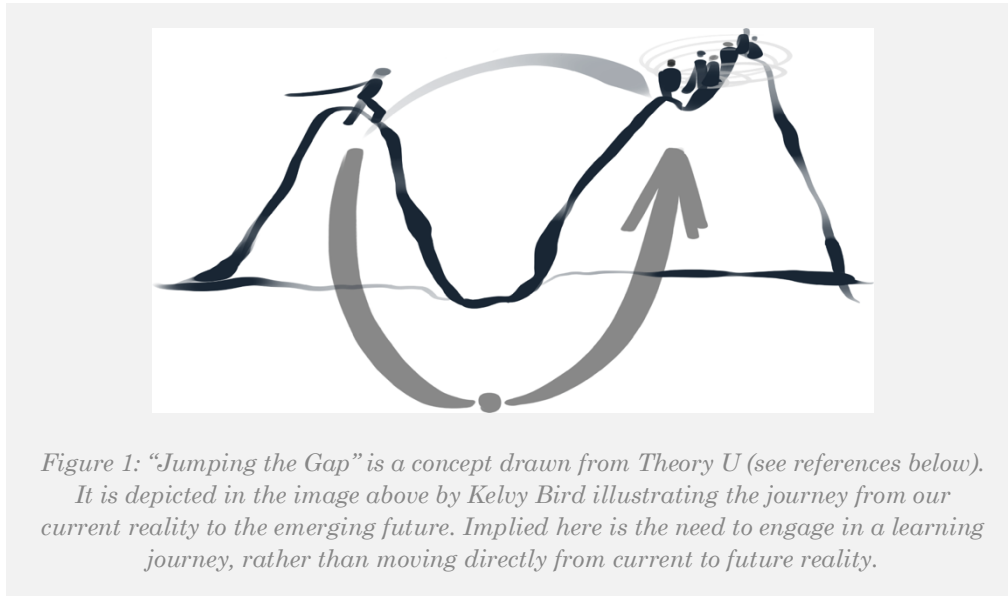
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Black ministry has historically found itself at the intersection of theology and racial justice. In this dialogue, a group of people, both ordained and lay, discuss their work in the Methodist Church in Great Britain, taking a deep look at self and system through the lens of justice and inclusion. The Methodist Church has a long history of grappling with issues of (racial) justice. In 2019, at a Racial Justice Symposium convened by the Methodist Church, participants engaged in an awareness-based systems change process to take a deep dive into what it means to shape inclusive community. Theory U (Scharmer, 2016, 2018; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013) provided the overarching framework and key principles for this journey of co-inquiry.

Subsequently the Church has embarked on a complex process of discernment to determine how to bring justice, dignity and solidarity to life throughout all dimensions of the Church. This conversation uncovers personal motivations and key influences which have contributed to a sense of calling to this work, and to personal and collective action. The conversation illuminates the nature and qualities of awareness based systems change: it is characterized by self-

reflection, trust and honesty, being present to one another and listening profoundly to one another's stories, and it demonstrates an appreciation of the complex, multi-faceted nature of the transformation that is needed. The difficult work of avoiding the temptation to "jump the gap" from problem to solution, and to enable instead the journey of conversion, is revealed in dialogue (figure 1).



The following dialogue is an abridged version of a two-part conversation.

Participating in the Dialogue:

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Dialogue Facilitators:

Megan Seneque

Research Associate: Susanna Wesley Foundation. Social process design, facilitation and research accompaniment.

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Director of the Susanna Wesley Foundation, Roehampton University. Research accompaniment.

The Dialogue

Megan: This is an invitation to be in conversation together and to bring our own personal motivations. What are we hoping for? Where do we think we might be taking the church on this journey of systems transformation, with a focus on justice, and on racial justice in particular?

Ermal: I was District Chair in the Methodist Church in the London District between 2006 and 2011, and in setting the parameters of our sense of belonging as a Methodist people within that, we were very clear that diversity and inclusion were important ingredients [within the newly formed District].

We tried at every stage and in every way to build on that, right from the inaugural celebration, all the way through. We are saying, “this is a dimension—justice, inclusion, recognition—that is an important part of what we are about”. I think that five and a half years into that experience, as I left that role of chair of the district and went out to South Africa, there was a sense almost of the project faltering - grinding to a halt; losing a bit of momentum and not being clear. What does it look like when we become fully inclusive?

In South Africa—I can’t say enough about how important and how transformative it was relearning the craft ministry in a totally different context.

Going there with this vision of the Rainbow Nation, all the euphoria of Mandela and the new beginning, and finding a situation in which the church is not one and the church does not understand what it means to be a united and inclusive church in South Africa.

Rainbow Nation is a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe post-apartheid South Africa, after South Africa's first fully democratic election in 1994.

The divisions were absolutely stark and real and no one had a model for saying, how do we get to the next stage, what does inclusion really look like in this situation?

And I said, actually, I think there’s some joining up that is needed: a conversation between what is happening in South Africa, or not happening, and

what was happening or beginning to happen, but had not been fulfilled in the UK.

Bevan: The first time I met Ermal, I was in the Black Police Association and there was a peace march. Another young man had been killed, and there was a peace march which was being organized by a number of Christian denominations, walking through London. We ended up in Brixton, in the square.

I remember there was a friend of mine from a Pentecostal background, I was a Methodist, and we said there is power here. Within the Black Police Association, it was driven by faith as well, our Christian faith. But I remember us saying that we needed to bring about change in London. It wasn't necessarily about the church, it was about trying to bring peace on the streets in terms of our young people killing themselves and the violence on the streets. And we said that we really needed to bring the churches together.

We started meeting different church leaders, and I remember Ermal was district chair at the time, and I remember approaching him and we were talking about this concept of bringing all of these different church leaders together. What we did was we got the Mayor's Office involved, which gave information from a local government perspective, in terms of what the challenges were, so that church leaders were able to have all the information to hand.

We did a survey where we had 2000 people respond in a week to the issues of violence. And we pulled it together. The Mayor's Office was listening, the police were listening, and I've always believed that the church had an unfulfilled role in leading society and bringing about peace in society and bringing about justice.

Then I left the Met and I became a counsellor, a political counsellor. Again, just looking at the issue of justice, and the whole thing around Grenfell was definitely about injustice, about not hearing.

"Grenfell" refers to a devastating fire which destroyed a residential tower block (Grenfell Tower) in North Kensington, West London, composed largely of social housing, on 14th June 2017. The fire killed 72 people, and injured over 70 others. The fire spread rapidly due to the building's external cladding. An inquiry found the exterior did not comply with regulations; residents had expressed significant safety concerns before the fire but had not been heard. The majority of residents came from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Those people were invisible, and all the things that are playing out in television now, that people had predicted that fire and they weren't being heard and the Transport Management Office and its arrogance, not listening to them. It's all part of the story that we're looking at in the church in terms of power and those people who are invisible, because they are different somehow. Whether it's because they're Muslim or they're non-White. I needed to take a break from local

politics and some of my national involvement. As God will lead these things, there was an opportunity to come and do this role in the Methodist Church.

The changes that we're trying to make in the Methodist Church, I see as much broader than just the Methodist Church. The JDS Strategy that we have is quite rightly focusing on getting our own house in order, to bring about a greater inclusion within the church and an inclusive church. But for me, I think it's one stepping stone in making us confident and bringing our light into the world and bringing change, and that's where I think we really need to be.

The JDS strategy refers to the Methodist Church in Britain's Justice, Dignity and Solidarity strategy, initiated following a report to Methodist Conference, the Church's governing body, in 2021. The strategy seeks to bring about a profound change in the culture, practices and attitudes of the Methodist Church so that all are able to be full participants.

For me, this is just a stepping stone, that we're able to embrace each other and to love each other and to respect each other. And to respect our difference. We've all spoken about this concept—which bothers me a little bit—living with contradictory convictions. It's a great concept, and if we can get it right it would be fantastic. But we're not proactive as a church in really teaching our members what that means.

Contradictory convictions: the term 'living with contradictory convictions' was initially coined in relation to discussions about marriage and relationships, particularly same-sex marriage, which has been a divisive issue within many Churches, including the Methodist Church. The Methodist Church has published a statement which, whilst acknowledging that there are issues on which not all agree, encourages people to be open and engage with one another, to seek to learn from another, and to show mutual respect, recognizing the truths which unite.

So, when it comes to some of the most sensitive issues that we're dealing with, whether it's an issue of race or whether it's an issue of homophobia or an issue around learning difficulties or whatever, they can become really polarized. And we've all witnessed, once you get to that point of polarization, people become entrenched. And because they're not able to challenge each other in a loving way, they're not able to really live out that living with contradictory convictions. They're not able to articulate that.

I think there is a challenge in our church to bring that understanding to our everyday members.

I see myself as an everyday member, because that's my starting point. I come to church for hope, for understanding. The everyday member comes to church with

their life, the challenges that they have in their everyday life, and they're looking for that hope. They're looking for something that connects them closer to God in a sense.

But there is a power dynamic between the ordained and those of us that are ordinary members, because there is a different lexicon, a different language and a different understanding. I see the JDS and the work that we've done together over the last two years as a stepping stone. And it links back to my first encounter with Ermal, which wasn't just about the church, it was about Londoners

So that's where I'm coming from, as well. But this is one cog in a much bigger machine for me, which is not just about the church. The church is important, and it has a way bigger leadership role than it currently occupies in my opinion.

Adrian: I really hear what Bevan is saying and when you speak of this gap between Christian academics and the person in the pew, that is perhaps one of the biggest failings of the church, because our message is one of incarnation - of actually making this all real in everyday language and everyday situations. And I think, in my journey, that is one of the driving things, and one of the particular failings that I see in the church that helps me to get motivated to get involved in something like this.

If we were to look in academic circles, there wouldn't be much debate that justice lies at the very center of the Christian message and what the church is about. But if you attend a church service outside of London, outside of the academic circles, outside of the academic institutions, the chance of hearing justice issues being the focus of the service is really small. And it's that giant gap; we've failed to disciple our committed members to the point that they realize we are a justice movement. That is what we are about.

We're not in the business of trying to provide a comfortable space in which people can come together and feel that they belong to the community—that's an absolute side issue. That's not what the focus of the church should be. But it is so often the focus of how churches are run, whether it's in South Africa or whether it's in the UK. And for me, I grew up in the Methodist Church, I was a child of the manse (accommodation for clergy), this was all in South Africa.

My real conversion moments were those when I met with people who were able to express to me about justice issues.

But we were pews full of people waiting to be disciplined, waiting to speak about justice issues, as Ermal pointed out, in a very divided South Africa.

Most of that work that we've done and developed from there has been in terms of racial justice, but I think we understand that we can't talk about it in a vacuum as an isolated issue. Really the issues that are facing us as a church, as a country, as a world, are all justice issues, and they're all coming in multiple forms. As much as we have failed to disciple as well as we might have, one of the real assets of the church that makes it really different to just about any other

organization, is that it should have at its heart, a core of people who are willing to serve others.

A core of people who are willing to get on with doing the right thing, not only when it suits them, but even when it costs them. And so really, we've got this huge, forget about our financial resources, we've got this amazing human resource that is committed in theory to justice, that is committed in theory to service, to helping, to caring. And I mean, we should be this unstoppable force in the transformation of the world. But we're running a coffee club on Saturday, so we haven't really got time to speak about these issues.

We really just need to raise our eyes a little bit, to raise our ambition a little bit, to decide, what is our primary thing that is really driving us.

Megan: Can I invite Charity and Jill as well, and I know that these threads will continue to be woven.

Charity: It's probably better to come to this from my lived experience. I have crossed boundaries, I am Zimbabwean and I've lived in this country for over thirty years. So, my experience of life has been in two or three places really. My experience of church has been both an African experience, and a British experience. But when I was at home, nobody talked to me about injustice either. When we talked about injustice, it was particularly in relation to the land and the land issue was a big issue.

These were questions in a young person trying to understand why I can't do this and why, when I go into the city with my parents, there were certain places my mum wouldn't let us go, because there weren't a lot of Black people there. It just didn't make sense. But I never really sat down with anybody who explained to me about injustice. I went to church and, if anything, the church reinforced this sense of injustice by being complicit and not saying anything about it either from the pulpit or in Bible study groups.

Then when I came into this country, I had the privilege of working as a nurse for about 25 years. I happened to have been around in 1995 when The Calman- Hine report in the National Health Service (NHS) came out. This was the first report that highlighted the NHS post code lottery in the country in the treatment of cancer. So that if you were diagnosed with cancer, but you lived in a particular post code, your chances of dying were higher in comparison to another in another post code - usually the post codes in affluent areas. For example, if you were in Newham, your chances of dying were higher than somebody in Kensington. I also happened to have worked in both boroughs, as a nurse and as a cancer services commissioner respectively.

I began to then realize that, actually, the things that we were talking about in church today, it is possible that the church is many years behind the secular world and behind the NHS in some areas of justice, because they've (NHS) been talking about these issues for a very long time. I was also involved in a research project which looked at how people from Black and ethnic minority groups were

unable to navigate the systems in this country. Not just NHS systems, but also the wider systems that they needed in order to lead their lives fully. It was pretty difficult to listen to some of these stories that were coming through and I wanted to do something.

Out of that piece of work, came the language and cultural Advocacy System for people diagnosed with cancer, which is now still being used in the NHS, so we don't have children advocating for their parents any more in hospitals, for example.

What annoyed me the most was, why was it these Black people in this particular area, were not being listened to? Irrespective of all the research that had been conducted, nothing had happened. Then I had the huge privilege of meeting Ermal when they brought the Zimbabwean and Ghanaian Fellowships together in 2008. I began to wonder why fellowships were not part of the church.

I then began to realize that actually, similar issues of injustice are also existent in the church, they were not being talked about in the church. When I started Local Preachers training, I was really fortunate. I had men and women, White, who began to talk to me about some of these issues.

They began to talk to me about issues of justice including race, gender. And actually, they brought something that was at the back of my mind to the fore. I realized, maybe this is what has been troubling me all along and I needed to find out a little bit more. While in that process, I went to South Africa on a mission trip.

I was shocked at my experience of South Africa and the South African Church. There is a lot of research out there about what is it that is stopping change from happening. Nobody is going to tell me that they are discovering anything new at all, it's all been discovered, it's all there. Why is it not being implemented?

I then began to realize that throughout the ten days I was in South Africa, everybody who led a workshop in South Africa was a White person, White woman or White man. The Black people were just there being recipients. That made me very angry. In other words, I realized that the issues of representation are not just an issue in the church in this country or the secular world, but also across other countries, into the world really. That kept giving me energy and I wanted to do something, I wanted to contribute, I wanted to make a difference in any small way I could. There are some voices that need to be magnified, there are things that need to be challenged. There are places where power is sitting, where it really needs to be challenged. We need to dismantle this power, we need to share this power.

Then I was introduced to liberation theologies. They began the process of giving me ways in which I can think about these things theologically, or articulate them theologically, because I was experiencing them. Up to this point, I had not developed a language to articulate what I was feeling, and what I wanted to express.

There is something in me that always tells me when there's something that is not right. I am still developing the language to express my thoughts and feelings. I have now realized that, sometimes people are marginalized because of the language that we use. We hide behind language, metaphor and terminology. That then means we don't have to explain a lot of things and engage in dialogue. I don't know whether the church is frightened of dialogue or frightened of talking to one another and getting to understand each other in that way. And so I think I have roughly just mentioned some of those things that have led me to this place.

Jill: I think the Methodist Church was really instrumental in me being aware of what we're all calling injustice, in a way that I probably wouldn't have been had I not been part of the Methodist Church. Having grown up as a child in different parts of the country, because my dad was a Methodist minister, I was kind of introduced to all sorts of different British cultures. Actually English, not even British. We moved round England, but the cultures where we moved were really different from each other.

And all the time I had my grandparent's home that I went back to every single school holiday, so about six times every year, until I was about 18. It was a White, working-class mining village, where people had outside toilets still and nobody ever went anywhere; nobody ever had any money to go on holiday except maybe one day at Mablethorpe. That was the culture.

So, I was kind of going backwards and forwards between that culture, which was White and English, and all these different cultures, depending on where my dad had been moved to. I think that was really important to me, just that awareness from the beginning. But I remember during that time, somehow getting the idea that we are all made in the image of God.

I remember being really challenged by that, because then whenever I met anybody who I really didn't like, I used to think to myself, "this person is made in the image of God". I need to stick with this person, not just dismiss them because I may not like them. They're made in the image of God so, actually, what can I learn from them?

We ended up living in Newham, and actually, Charity, I've never heard anybody else voice that thing about children translating for parents, but, as a teacher, that was all my school children's experience all the time. They were constantly being taken out of school to go down to the Benefits Office or wherever to try and explain, to translate all the time.

Being a teacher of kids in those situations, where they were being stopped and searched and all that, I've never really experienced any injustice for myself, but I've kind of felt it - the only way I can put it - as I've got to know the people who have been impacted. If you really care about the people you're meeting, you somehow get to feel it.

I've ended up in this conversation because of my job with the Methodist Church. And I think of it as getting to the bottom of things, and that's what it is when I

get there. I know I have a propensity to jump across and to go from what the problem is to what it needs to be. And I think actually, what talking with all of you has helped me see is that I do get to the bottom of things, but I don't necessarily think of it in that way. I'm doing it without realizing I'm doing it.

Megan: I think the point that you've just made, Jill, is there's not a lot of opportunity to make sense together, to actually unpick words and language and understand what we mean by that.

Erma: I think that probably takes me into the next stage of sharing my experience which, is having done the collection of information for my research project and reflecting on it, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that something needed to change in their experience and in the experience of the Methodist Church. It was universally accepted: how things are at present is not how we want them to be or how we believe God wants them to be.

So that conviction of a need to change often went hand in hand with a sense of, "but we're not quite sure what it is that needs to change and how that needs to be changed". Those two questions are actually often connected and crucially important. What is the change that is desirable, necessary, and required, and how do we achieve that? I think for me, I became more and more convinced that it wasn't an answer that you discover by a magical formula, but it's a journey that you undertake with others. The people that we journey with, will help to shape the response that we discover.

It's therefore vitally important that the people with whom we are journeying be as representative, as inclusive as we can possibly make them. There will never be an entirely representative group, that's not achievable. But within the kind of parameters of our involvement to say, "Who should we be talking to about this, and how can we engage in respectful and continuing dialogue with them for as long as it takes for us to discover together what it is that we need to do?" That is vitally important.

I think someone said at some point in our conversation, there aren't enough spaces in our life together as a church where those conversations can happen. We are not structured for them. We work on a different model. We operate on a completely different basis, we have been stuck in the old jug to mug model.

Someone has the wisdom, the insight, and we pour it out in someone, and they take a cupful with gratitude and go away and sip it slowly and come back the week after for another fill up. We get locked into that cycle, that understanding. But until we can actually say, no, we are learners together. We sit at one another's feet and we are there to sit there, gathering round the feet of Jesus himself, and to learn together what it means. That for me is one of the very important parts of this process.

I think what we discover is that whatever we do in the room, and whatever we say to one another is impacted by the people who are not in the room. We are connected with them. It isn't "them". They are part also of us. While we can

never have everyone within the one space physically, that essentiality of our engaging intensely with the people beyond is equally important. And again, that is what we have not been good at.

Megan: It's recognizing that we are always in relationship, always. There's human potential and possibility and relationship, that's what we live in.

So these solidarity circles that Charity's talking about where people share struggles, the listening through lived experience that Jill's talking about, that you all refer to, it's actually about opening ourselves up. And the word presencing means being present to what lies dormant and is possible in and amongst us in relationship, in every single moment. Before we structure anything else, that's the starting point.

Charity: What I also discovered during these solidarity groups was that it was really important that these people are trusting of one another. And without the trust and without the confidence in each other, people are not as open. We lose out on people's wisdom, on God's voice through other people, because then people withhold, because they are not really sure what you are going to do, what your next steps are.

I think within the church we are still at that point where we still need to gain trust, and confidence with each other. It just puts us off engaging. So somehow we need to be a lot more transparent, a lot more trusting of one another and do what we say we are going to do.

Bevan: Can I just say something about the trust, because I do think that building trust and confidence is key to any engagement. Whether you create some new process in the church that you want everyone to engage in, if you haven't got the trust in it or you think there's an ulterior motive, you won't engage in it. I think we've still got some challenges to overcome in that area, even just in everyday encounters.

There is something about creating that environment where you can just be who you are and not judged as a result of it. There's an unspoken fear sometimes that says, if I raise this issue, somehow I am going to be "othered"; in a sense, I am the problem

Everyone's talking about identity politics and political correctness gone mad and all this kind of thing. "Wokism". For me, it makes our work more difficult in the church if we don't get to grips with it. It's recognizing that, for some people, they feel that their very identity is being eroded, and challenged to a certain extent.

Something that they've believed of who they are or who they thought they were and who they thought their families and their communities were, for probably generations upon generations, is being challenged. Whether that's an issue in terms of their perspective of the gospel—whatever the thing is that you've believed all your life—or you've come from a country where your whole socialization has informed your theology, has informed how you see the world.

Because some of that socialization has also been enshrined in legislation, for instance. That as a church, we invite people from all over the world, is quite right. But what we never do is give the opportunity to have a discussion about who you are, your socialization, and the things that you thought were normal and the things that you've never really challenged, because it was part of your day-to-day society. It was a part of your day-to-day living, your culture.

But all of a sudden you get here and it's "bang, no, this isn't right, we changed this legislation back in the 70s or whatever, and you're wrong". I've just seen more and more of that, not just about same sex couples, but in terms of race, we talk about White working class boys and all this kind of stuff. Well, they're all important, they're all people, and we have to recognize that this isn't about rowing backwards.

In our quest to become more inclusive, we may well be inadvertently pushing others out. I think the process is creating "others", in a sense, if we're not proactive in terms of including them within that conversation and creating very safe spaces where they can re-engage and reimagine who they are and challenge themselves in a safe space.

I think it goes back to the thing that I raised, this whole concept of living with contradictory convictions. It's all tied in, it might not make that much sense in the moment, but I do feel that unless we give the opportunity for those who have a slightly different perspective to us, and are not on board the JDS journey, I don't think it's good enough to say, oh well they'll leave the church and we'll become a new church.

I think there are people that sit on the fence or genuinely feel that they are being challenged for something that they see as being right. And they do not have the privilege that we do of sitting down and hearing Charity or Ermal or Megan and being able over a two-year period to actually, in a safe space, change our positions and challenge our position.

Ermal: It has been important to recognize that what we are doing, the journey we're on, is going to cost. I mean cost us, spiritually and emotionally. There is no painless discipleship.

Megan: So, the question for us to continue to explore is what does it mean to shape inclusive community, that is committed to justice in all its dimensions?

Ermal: I've been thinking quite a lot about how deeply embedded the instinct to jump the gulf is. We see a problem and we want to leap over to the other side. We want to have resolutions and regulations that determine the new life. I'm slightly puzzled and intrigued by how deeply rooted that seems to be, that there's a problem, we want to solve it, and we want to solve it now.

The second thing that struck me was that there does come a conversion moment where, at some point, it clicks in the minds of two or three others who are listening: actually there does need to be a more systemic approach, a more holistic approach. And again, I'm intrigued as to what it is that brings that

lightbulb moment when we suddenly say: yes, we might need regulations, we might need structures, but above all we need a change of heart

I'm interested in what is that moment of realization and recognition that helps people to move from the, "let's jump the divide" to "let's journey".

Lastly, I think that the willingness to commit to listening and journeying and finding the people with whom we are listening, and to whom we are listening, is extremely important. And the willingness of that group to say, it's not easy, it's going to take time but we believe that the journeying will take us to that new place.

In a number of areas, I'm beginning to recognize that it is that willingness to stay with it that makes a difference. But then I still haven't quite solved what is it that makes people say, "I'm willing to step out on this journey with you." Is that about personal relationship? Is it about the confidence in the person who's inviting you? Is it entirely of the Spirit that prompts from within? Is it all of the above?

Bevan: I think it is an ongoing process and within that process I think key is relationship building. So, Ermal asked a question, is it something about a personal relationship? Well, I think it is.

If you think about, why are we all doing this? It's something to do with our roles. I know that it's our role and our history, I suppose. I just look back at my own experience of all these issues and it is definitely is an iterative process of saying, right, this is the thing that we have to do today.

What Ermal said around why are we so quick to want to solve the problem and look at processes and procedures, well, I think because it is a quick fix, away from the church, and also within the church. You could say, "we have a procedure today" and everybody breathes a sigh of relief - we have something which will work and then we run with it. Because we need that moment of, I'll use the word peace.... a moment where we feel we don't have to be battling with this injustice or this quest to be perfect.

So, it gives this respite until it fails again or until it's proved that it's not quite working. And the relationship bit is the others around you that you have trust and confidence in, giving you the strength to continue. You have to believe in those around you that you are on the same road, you are on the same journey.

Charity: I think it's really difficult to try and solve problems that we really haven't given ourselves an opportunity to inhabit. Therefore, what we're always going to be doing, is using the head. And out of that emerges the fear, the need to control, the need to be successful and the fear of failure.

Because in these kinds of places, failure is something that we want to avoid with everything that we have. But actually, it's okay. To embrace failure as part of the journey towards transformation, for me, is really important. But more important to me, I think, are these questions that liberation theologians always ask: who is

benefitting out of what we are doing? Who is involved in what we are doing and whom have we left out and, therefore, what can we do differently?

I think that takes time to do. And it's not about trying to be better than we are, but it's about being real and accepting the realities within which we are living with. And the idea that I think somebody raised about building relationships, for me, is really important.

When I sense history repeating itself, it induces anger, frustration, resentment, and it doesn't help the process. So, how do we do things in a way that we all are kind of in the same space, understanding that this is about something new emerging from an existing relationship?

How do we make that better? And the idea that we have to be battling with the system is exhausting. It's tiring. When you see a little hint of that happening, it's draining for some. Maybe not for everybody.

I think the question I've been battling with is: if this God is real, how has this been a blessing to some and not to others? How do we sing from the same hymnbook and, yet respond differently to each other? How do we share the Lord's Prayer and actually not mean it? Because the manifestation of what we are doing together is at odds with what we are proclaiming together. So, how do we help?

I lament the loss of small groups within the Methodist church. Because, personally, I feel some of that needs to be at that intimate level. But everything just tends to be at a much wider or bigger plain at the moment. Those are the kind of things that I've really been battling, just trying to find ways in which we can reconcile our not being perfect but being on the journey to perfection

Adrian: Thanks, Charity. I think that's crucial for me this thing of not being perfect but being on the journey to perfection no less. I think there is this natural tendency - but whose natural tendency, I don't know - to want to jump across and get the quick fix and not go on a journey towards perfection, but just to be perfect. We see that in some of the bad theology that's around. But that jumping across, that desire for it, is that just an innate human thing, or is it a management thing when we're trying to run something? Management's always trying to handle things and control them and get them to a place. I wonder if that's not also just a part of, I'm going to dare to say, our culture, although I know we don't all share the same culture. But perhaps there's something that's infused from Western culture about being very solution orientated.

I wonder, just wonder out loud, whether we would find more of a journey mentality in perhaps some other cultures other than Western culture. I was intrigued with what Bevan said about us being here because of roles and history, and my immediate reaction was, no, I'm not sure I fit into either of those categories. I'm here because of my calling. I'm here because I think I can make a difference in something that I think is fundamentally important.

Perhaps we might easily call it about relationship, about community, about calling, whatever. But in the end, we're all reaching for this thing that drives us,

that's beyond words, that really completes us, that makes us whole, or we hope makes us whole, or puts us on that journey to being whole. We're all using slightly different words to experience a deep movement and a deep need.

I think often what perhaps is happening in the church, is that we hear this idea of conversion, and we think it means only one thing. It means one day I wasn't a Christian and the next day I was a Christian. Whereas actually, it's from one day I didn't believe to one day I did believe. One day I didn't see the need to one day I did see the need. So, if we just limit it to becoming Christian then we're actually failing to incarnate it and see the depth of it.

When we're talking about this journey or we're talking about discipleship or we're talking about relationship, those for me are all more or less the same place. Discipleship happens in relationship. There's a conversion element of it, of course, but it happens in relationship.

These are just simple religious words, but there's this gracious, loving acceptance of other people that enables them to be themselves and continue in the journey with us and with the community towards becoming all that they can be.

Ermal: Can I come back on this desire for instant fix and is it about control or is it about management, and all the rest? If you go back to the Genesis story, the account of the fall, in a way, that could be read as an account of an attempt at instant solution. You shall become like gods if you just take this step. You shall become wiser. You shall become much more powerful.

The paradox is that God is saying, I do want to share life with you, but do it on my terms, in my way. And the temptation, the deep human instinct is to say, no, we want to do it our way.

So, maybe it is both cultural and actually something about what we understand by fallenness that we are addressing in wanting to say, actually folks, this journey of transformation really does go deep, it is about challenging the foundations of your belief and your systems about how we achieve godliness, how we achieve holiness. Is it by regulation and structure, by grabbing, or by letting go?

There are three interconnected paths that we could be walking. One is about personal prayer and devotion. What is your personal relationship with God? The second is about the accountability and the encouragement. Who are you talking with about what you're experiencing and how are they encouraging you on the way? And the third is about social action, direct or indirect. What are we doing about what we have heard? How have we put this into practice? How are we putting this into practice, either in terms of our service in the community, or engaging with a situation further afield? Unless we are doing something with what we have heard when we gather together in church—it seems to me that our returning to church and to worship the next time becomes quite shallow and not as rich as it could be.

Charity: I really think that it might be helpful to have the leadership groups with much more diversity to start off with. Because it is the leadership who are then influencing what is happening elsewhere. I was fascinated when I came here. On my profile, I said that I had wanted to be in an ethnically and culturally diverse community, and I landed up in Royston.

Royston is a small town in the English county of Hertfordshire. It is not known for its cultural diversity, being predominantly White. In contrast, Newham, a borough within London, is one of the most ethnically diverse districts in England.

I really had to begin to think what diversity means. Actually, I found a lot more diversity in this place than I did in Newham, and it's been fascinating. It's been enriching. So, maybe it will be helpful to understand, to have some kind of a working definition of what we mean by diversity. But lead from the top. Whatever happens there, trust me, it influences what is happening everywhere else.

Bevan: Can I just pick up on what Charity's just said? I think I agree with it to a certain extent, and I think, definitely, it has to happen there. But we have to look at the environment from which the vast majority of our members are coming from. Because we're in a privileged position to be trying to engineer and direct change. Our members that come on a Sunday or come to fellowship groups, they're not part of this conversation.

Some of them will believe in helping others on the journey and in their relationship with God, but ultimately, they're trying to navigate their lives, locally. So, there's something about context and the importance to the individual and to families, locally. There's something about, I think, historical relationships as Ermal touched upon. Because that's critical.

We talk from a very privileged position. We talk about models. We talk about the being and doing. Well, the two go hand-in-hand, and when you're worried about putting food on the plate or getting your next job, or you're worried about violence next door, it's so far removed from what we're talking about. We have to be able to create that bridge. Our members want hope. They want peace. They want to be able to thrive rather than just survive.

And, yes, the middle classes—the chapel on the hill—can do that and look down at everybody else. That still exists today, whether symbolically or physically. I think the challenge for our church is that it's not just diversity in terms of ethnicity, or age, or gender, it's regionally. It's huge, it's complex. Rural, urban. We have to have understand that context. We have to walk in our members' footsteps.

What is the calling for all of this? Who are we serving, and engaging with? I understand we're serving God, but in terms of this process and this change, who is it for?

I would want to know what's happening locally. I would want to know the challenges for those in my church that I could go to and share and empathize with their challenges. So, this discussion is so far detached, for me at the moment, from their lives and it's a question of how do we create that bridge. I think there is a bridge, but I don't think that we're actually seeing it at the moment.

Ermal: I think my quick answer to what are we about, would be something along the lines of experiencing the fullness of life for all—that all people might have life and have it in all its forms.

The reality is that what we are experiencing in the Methodist church at present doesn't feel like an abundant life for many people and we are longing to see that happen.

Towards the start of the journey, we very consciously said that we are looking at that question through the lens of racial justice, initially. But we recognize that is only one set of lenses that we can use. What has also become clear to me is that the lessons we are learning through this process, need to be applied much more widely to the life of the church.

I think, if I hear him right, Adrian, that that's one of the points you keep on making. There is a deeper conversion needed in the life of the church in order that we might achieve that fullness of life for all. Not just in relation to racial justice but in every dimension of our living as a people of God.

So, what we are saying in this in-dialogue conversation is that we are discovering the importance of small groups, of solidarity circles. We are discovering the importance of staying, patience, and perseverance. And bearing the pain is an inescapable part of that. All of these lessons that we're learning, I think, then have to be translated into the wider context of the church.

That's where I've been fascinated: to see how the things that I'm learning in the course of EDI, JDS these conversations, they really do have implications for how we structure the life of our church as a people of God together, wherever we are, in whatever communities we are placed

It is making that connection, I think, that is going to be part of what I hope will come out of this. As I believe Gus John said in the 70's,—Black people have been the barium meal that revealed weaknesses, flaws in the body of the church. And what happened is that rather than using it as a diagnostic tool, we started treating the people as the problem. They weren't the problem. They were revealing flaws in the system.

And I think we've got another opportunity now to say JDS has taught us some important lessons about failures, and weaknesses in the whole body of the

church, which we are wanting to address, which is a systemic issue. I think that really is where we've come, not full circle, but we've moved on significantly in our journey and our understanding of the task that we are about.

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