

Stories simply shared

One way in which the Bible Society has responded to these challenges is with the Telling Place project, which explores how stories can communicate where other styles of communication, like the sermon perhaps, are not so effective. This suggests that simply sharing the stories of our faith, and leaving them to speak for themselves, may be a very creative way forward.

- What stories from the Bible or elsewhere most ‘speak to you’ about your faith?
- Which stories from the Bible most set you thinking?
- How far does the way Jesus communicated give us an example here?
- Once again, what might be the consequences for the style of our evangelism?

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### What Next?

Other *M:Guides* available are: ‘*Worship*’, ‘*Other Voices 1*’ and ‘*Other Voices 2*’. *Other Voices* challenge through reading and reflection on passages of contemporary Christian writings. They are based on the four themes of *Our Calling* : to increase awareness of God, learning and caring, to challenge injustice and mission and evangelism. *Priorities for The Methodist Church* a series of Bible studies and reflections.

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# M:Guides



The **Methodist** Church

Lost in Space?

An exploration of Mission in a plural society

The M:Guides are a series of study packs produced by the Methodist Church Training & Development Officers in the London, Nottingham & Derby and Lincoln & Grimsby Districts

## INTRODUCTION

This *M:Guide* sets out to help you reflect on the society in which we live and the challenges the church faces in fulfilling its calling to Mission. The four themes explored take their starting points from *Our Calling*. The *M:Guide* can be used individually, but it is best used in a group.

The *M:Guide* offers no organised programme of mission. Its aim is to get you thinking and praying and experimenting hard as you begin to work out what mission means for your church in your context.

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A Prayer

You may like to use this prayer of the Dalai Lama to open or close your discussions:

*May I become at all times, both now and forever
A protector for those without protection
A guide for those who have lost their way
A ship for those with oceans to cross
A bridge for those with rivers to cross
A sanctuary for those in danger
A lamp for those without light
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
And a servant to all in need.*

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### SESSION 1

#### **‘Pic-n-Mix’: Reflecting on an awareness of God and of God’s love**

- Where and when do you think people today most sense the presence of God?
- Where and when do they see God’s love at work?
- Many people appear to have no awareness of God or God’s love. How far is that an accurate impression, and what reasons might there be for such unawareness?

*My research points not to the appeal of aliens or the paranormal as a cohesive belief system of some sort, but to the appeal of the idea that such phenomena might possibly be true. And this, perhaps, is a more widespread stance than has been reflected in surveys that have asked, “what do you believe in?” rather than “is this or that possibly true?”*

*When the media articulate the possible, then they are subtly and unintentionally providing the fodder for a change in religious beliefs. It’s not that the writers of *The X-Files* intentionally set out to undermine the classic faiths of Judeo-Christianity. But that programme, and others like it, look at the idea of an unknown force controlling the universe.*

*These fictional programmes raise a question that resonates well in the context of our times, in which the certainties of Modernism – science, theology, reality itself – have come into question: there are happenings and events in this world and beyond that remain unexplained. These are profoundly religious considerations, of course.*

*Unfortunately, religion is not handling them well. Teens are surprisingly well-versed on the foibles of religious institutions already anyway, from the Crusades to its patriarchal leadership styles to its role in contemporary “culture wars”. Maybe it’s time to respect teens’ scepticism, and to admit when we don’t have all the answers while talking about how we live with ambiguities ourselves. Otherwise, religion may continue to seem too pretentious, too presumptuous, and too closed-minded to the questions teenagers find most intriguing.”*

- How far do you recognise these comments on teen culture?
- How far do the characteristics identified here also relate to other age groups?
- In what ways do you think the church can respond?
- How can members of the congregation support church leaders in responding effectively?
- What are the implications for our evangelism?

- Are there any qualities you would like to add?
- What conclusions about the meeting of faiths can you draw from this brief bible study?

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SESSION 4

SALES AND STORIES – making more followers of Jesus Christ

How can we evangelise or in any way witness to our faith in our plural society? Particularly in the context of the ideas and experience we discussed in Session 1? This session explores some of the struggles we face in communicating our faith today.

A Sales Culture

We live today in a ‘sales culture’. At every point we are beset by the attempt to sell us something – it invades our homes, keeps us company along the street, surprises us at every corner. Of course, we have grown wise to it. We are sceptical of all the claims to be better, cheaper, more useful, absolutely indispensable, to solve all our problems, make us what we long to be, and bring lasting happiness. We encourage our children to be discerning too. We pay the penalty when they are not.

- How far do you agree that we live in a ‘sales culture’? What examples can you think of to support or contradict this?
- What impact might this have on the way we do our evangelism?

‘X Files’ and Possibilities

The following extracts are from an article by Lynn Schofield Clark in the Bible Society magazine ‘The Bible in Transmission’ Autumn 1999. She reports on her research on religion among today’s teenagers and focuses on a conversation about the supernatural.

“Did this teenager, or do others, believe in the existence of aliens, demons, witches and other supernatural beings? Sociological research has demonstrated that “true believers” in such phenomena are relatively rare. Yet as several teens like this one told me, they believed that they were possibly true, and this is an important distinction.

A walk in Milton Keynes.

Milton Keynes is a remarkable place. Don’t disagree until you have read on! It is a young city with a high proportion of young people in its population. Its religious life is fascinating. The city churches are part of a major ecumenical experiment, which is adventurous and refreshing – but in just the five minutes it takes to walk a hundred yards or so by Willen Lake, a different dimension is revealed.

Park by the water sports centre, with its atmosphere of dedicated physical endeavour, and along the shore you can follow the ‘Fitness Trail’, where ‘exercise points’ cater for every level of athletic ability. Through the subway and a different world opens up. The ‘unspoilt’ part of the lake is a nature reserve with a hide to watch the huge flocks of birds. When the sun is low in the sky it is especially glorious. Lift your gaze a little and on the horizon just beyond the lake’s end is the traditional profile of Willen Parish Church. In the corner of your eye to the left, far from traditional, the Peace Pagoda. We gathered there on the evening of Hiroshima Day for worship led by the Buddhist monks from the monastery just behind it. A hundred paper lanterns were lit and floated on the lake as the dusk gathered – beautiful and profoundly moving. Just in front of you – is this traditional or not? – a newly constructed stone circle. Here is part of the report of its opening from the *Milton Keynes Citizen*:

“...the mayor, representatives of all city faiths and hopefully, native Americans and even Kalahari Bushmen will be at the Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel when it is inaugurated by Indonesian-cum-North American Hopi Indian Roy Littlesun. Supported by Milton Keynes Council, Milton Keynes Parks Trust and funded by the Landfill Tax through EB (MK) Ltd, Shanks and English Partnership, the £100,000 project will according to trustee Ian Macfarlane be ‘a space where everyone can share their visions, wishes and prayers for global peace’. Stone circles have appeared in cultures throughout history. “This one is a unique sculptural expression appropriate to our times”, said Ian – himself guided by his spiritual teacher HH Swamiji Purna Maharaj.”

Questions:

- What does the ‘walk’ tell us about the different ways in which people express (a) their priorities in life, and (b) their awareness of the ‘spiritual dimension’ in our society?
- How far do you think that the sights on the walk evoke an awareness of God?
- How would you explain such developments in our society?
- Are they, in your opinion, positive or negative?
- How can the church respond? What possible options are there? What would you recommend?
- What experience do you have of ‘spirituality’ outside the church?
- Is there a similar walk you might take in your area?

‘Wrestling and Resting’

Here are two experiences from ‘Wrestling and Resting’ ed. Ruth Harvey. A collection of stories of spirituality published by CTBI in 2000.

‘The Sap of Life’ by Alison Newall

“That our spirituality is rooted in our bodies, in matter, is a theme picked up by the poet and eco-feminist Susan Griffin. In the poem ‘This Earth’ she expresses what for her is a shared experience with creation of suffering, endurance and renewal.

‘This earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring and how loved I am, how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know: we are stunned by this beauty, and I do not forget what she is to me, what I am to her.’

Through mutual love we learn what it means to become our truest selves, made in the image of God, reflecting God’s creativity and vulnerable love. In this way we learn what it means to be truly at home in our bodies. The Celtic poet and mystic John O’Donaghue writes:

While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of nirvana and salvation, are directly connected with religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however.

Shen-Pen Kyi-Sem

Those who practice religion would, of course, be right to say that such qualities, or virtues, are fruits of genuine religious endeavour and that religion therefore has everything to do with developing them and with what may be called spiritual practice. But let us be clear on this point. Religious faith demands spiritual practice. Yet it seems there is much confusion, as often among religious believers as among non-believers, concerning what this actually consists of. The unifying characteristic of the qualities I have described as ‘spiritual’ may be said to be some level of concern for others’ well-being. In Tibetan, we speak of shen-pen kyi-sem, meaning ‘the thought to be of help to others’. When we think about them, we see that each of the qualities noted is defined by an implicit concern for others’ well-being.

- How far do you agree with the views of the Dalai Lama?
- At which points do you disagree?
- How comfortable are you with the distinction he makes between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, and the conclusions he draws?
- If there is a distinction, how far is it possible for religion to work against spirituality? The Dalai Lama sees spirituality as more important than religion...how far do you agree? Why?
- What impression have you formed of the Dalai Lama from this extract of his book? How far can he speak to the world of today?
- What new agenda for the church might emerge from these thoughts, especially in our teaching and preaching, and our encouragement for each other to be involved in practical acts of service and challenging injustice?

A short bible study:

Read 1 Corinthians 13, and compare it with what the Dalai Lama said about the characteristics of ‘spirituality’ and ‘shen-pen kyi-sem’.

- What compares or contrasts with the Bible description of Christian love?

No Magic, No Mystery

In calling for a spiritual revolution, am I advocating a religious solution to our problems after all? No. As someone nearing seventy years of age at the time of writing, I have accumulated enough experience to be completely confident that the teachings of the Buddha are both relevant and useful to humanity. If a person puts them into practice, it is certain that not only they but others, too, will benefit. My meetings with many different sorts of people the world over have, however, helped me realise that there are other faiths, and other cultures, no less capable than mine of enabling individuals to lead constructive and satisfying lives. What is more, I have come to the conclusion that whether or not a person is a religious believer does not matter much. Far more important is that they be a good human being.

Moreover, the one who is compassionate, loving, patient, tolerant, forgiving and so on to some extent recognises the potential impact of their actions on others and orders their conduct accordingly. Thus spiritual practice according to this description involves, on the one hand, acting out of concern for others' well-being. On the other, it entails transforming ourselves so that we become more readily disposed to do so.

To speak of spiritual practice in any terms other than these is meaningless.

My call for a spiritual revolution is thus not a call for a religious revolution.

Religion and Spirituality

Actually, I believe there is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims of salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or nirvana. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, rituals, prayer and so on. Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness to both self and others.

Your body is the only home that you have in the universe. It is in and through your body that your soul becomes visible and real for you. Your body is the home of your soul on earth... The body is the angel of the soul.'

For me, creativity and vulnerable love and a sense of being alive are wrought out of the darkness of God as well as Her light, out of the wildness of God as well as Her order, out of the pain of God as well as Her pleasure."

'Bus Stop Spirituality' by Niall Cooper

"I think I've found a place of spiritual significance – even in the midst of the city, which may yet become a shrine and a place of pilgrimage for the twenty-first century.

It's the number 86 bus stop on the corner of Moss Lane East and Chichester Road on the border of Hulme and Moss Side. I used to cycle past it regularly on my way to work – fast and furious, late and in a rush, with my mind full of the fifteen things I had to do that day. Sometimes now I catch the bus further up the road, and can look down on the stop from the top deck of the bus. Sometimes the bus stop is empty, but more often there are two or three people gathered at it, waiting for the bus (as you might expect).

I used to ignore it entirely. But then one day, it occurred to me, what if one of those people waiting at the number 86 bus stop, possibly, just possibly, might be Jesus? I wouldn't know, of course, and since I've had that thought, I've never stopped at the bus stop to check.

But, somehow, in some obscure way, I am 'strangely warmed' by the thought that in the hurly burly of the city, of the myriad of happenings that I never get to see and myriad of people that I never get to know, God is waiting – along with the rest of us – for the number 86 bus."

- Which of the two experiences do you identify most strongly with...and why?

Lost in Space

In her reflections on the search for awareness of God in contemporary society, Gill O'Connell describes our situation with the help of some lyrics by Roma Ryan (Enya).

*"I walk the maze of moments
But everywhere I turn to, begins a new beginning,
but never finds a finish
I walk to the horizon and there I find another*

*To leave the thread of all-time and let it make a dark line
In hopes that I can still find the way back to the moment,
I took the turn and turned to
Begin a new beginning
Still looking for the answer
I cannot find the finish
It's either this or that way
It's one way or the other... "*

...and Gill continues, "...*meaning is transitory and contingent, and both identity and meaning are relative. Identity and meaning therefore have no foundations – they are a construct, and, like any consumer, you can choose identity and meaning from a whole variety of styles and change them like a set of clothes. The ultimate paradox is that here we are confronted with all this choice, and yet more so than ever before, the foundational truths that we would use to guide us in our choices are rapidly fading into the background. The self has lost its identity, and has become a passive victim in the unending assault of competing claims of the mass media. The media no longer describes reality – it constructs it... We are lost in space... Truths are plural, Meanings are relative, Selves are decentred. Awareness without bearings.*"

- 'Lost in space', 'awareness without bearings', - how far do you recognise that confusion in our society? Or is the point overstated?
- How is the Church called to respond?

Session 3 Mine and Yours –

Being a good neighbour and challenging injustice

To explore the plural world in which we live in order to find some fresh perspectives on living in a true compassionate way, we turn to a man who is universally respected, the Dalai Lama. In his book '*Ancient Wisdom Modern World*' he attempts to find a way of living in the new millenium based on the Buddhist wisdom that has nurtured him. Here is an opportunity to see what we might learn from someone of another faith.

From: *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, pub. Abacus

Modern Society

"According to my understanding, our overemphasis on material gain reflects an underlying assumption that what it buys can, by itself alone, provide us with all the satisfaction we require. Yet by nature, the satisfaction material gain can provide us with will be limited to the level of the senses. If it were true that we human beings were no different from animals, this would be fine. However, given the complexity of our species – in particular the fact of our having thoughts and emotions as well as imaginative and critical faculties – it is obvious that our needs transcend the merely sensual. The prevalence of anxiety, stress, confusion, uncertainty and depression among those whose basic needs have been met is a clear indication of this. Our problems, both those we experience externally – such as wars, crime and violence – and those we experience internally – our emotional and psychological sufferings – cannot be solved until we address this underlying neglect. That is why the great movements of the last hundred years and more – democracy, liberalism, socialism – have all failed to deliver the universal benefits they were supposed to provide, despite many wonderful ideas. A revolution is called for, certainly. But not a political, an economic or even a technical revolution. We have had enough experience of these during the past century to know that a purely external approach will not suffice. What I propose is a spiritual revolution.

Hindu, the experience that the young man shared with us would be a part of the lifetime process of turning and returning, of discovering how our very turning to God can be a self-centred move.

To claim to have had salvation so expeditiously and so early is too much of a claim to make and too heavy a burden to carry for a seventeen-year-old, who has yet to meet the vicissitudes of life. The Hindu would agree that a person of seventeen should of course not drink, smoke or be disobedient to parents. If it took a dramatic religious experience for him to mend his ways, that is also understandable. But to talk of this in terms of “sin” and “salvation”, even when it was a kind of turning one’s life to God, is to trivialize both concepts and the glory that awaits a soul that finally finds itself in God.

This is not to undermine the experience of the young man. I myself had such an experience of Christ in my youth, though I was not saved from the same “sins”. There is an experience of Christ as one who challenges and transforms one’s life.

And yet, the incident points to the complexity of what mission is all about. For all its good intentions and sincerity, mission that is not rooted in dialogue, and does not take the witness of our neighbours’ life in God, can be misdirected, misunderstood and miss its purpose.

D.T. Niles once said at our clergy retreat that one of the crises facing mission is that we Christians are more convinced of ‘our need to be in mission’ than of the ‘need of our neighbours to hear the gospel’. Much mission takes place because of our need to be in mission: because the great commission has commanded us to go into all the world: because ‘woe to me if I do not preach the gospel’. But if we truly believe that the gospel is for and about our neighbour, we may be more prepared to listen.”

- What are your reactions to this story, and Wesley Ariarajah’s comments on it?
- What are the challenges for us as individual Christians, and as a church?

SESSION 2

FAITH TO FAITH – Growing and Learning as Christians

One of the most challenging and enriching features of life today is the meeting of world faiths. We often have neighbours who belong to other faiths, and our children learn about them at school. This presents a new and exciting challenge for the church. It offers a tremendous opportunity to learn. Discovering other faiths is not only a fascinating adventure in itself, it is a sure way of understanding our own faith more deeply. In this session we listen to the words and experience of S. Wesley Ariarajah from his book ‘Not without my Neighbour’ which reflects on his life in Sri Lanka and his work with the World Council of Churches.

Wesley Ariarajah lived in a plural context from his earliest days. He was welcomed to family prayers in the home of Hindu neighbours as a child and they joined in the prayers of his Christian family. He became known to the Hindi community as a ‘dialogue person’ and describes the welcome he received to their worship as a Methodist minister.

Not without my Neighbour by S. Wesley Ariarajah, pub. WCC

“I recall those events now, some two decades later, with a measure of surprise. My talk would come in the middle of the ‘bhajan’, the singing together of devotional songs. On such occasions I would begin with a story from Hindu mythology or with some scriptural references or sayings from Hinduism to create the ambience, and not to be too discontinuous with what was going on. I would, however, talk about the significance of Christmas and Easter for Christians, also indicating the universal significance we attach to these events. Even though I always “preached the gospel” (for what else can one do on the themes of Christmas and Easter?), they continued to invite me, also to speak on other occasions – a courtesy they do not normally extend to Christian ministers.”

However, as a minister he was not in a position to return this sort of invitation, either to Sunday services or to mid-week prayer meetings

in a Christian home. He explains why:

“I might ask the Hindu Swami from the Ramakrishna mission or the Buddhist monk from the Wellawatte Vihara to speak in the church hall on ‘national reconciliation’ or ‘world peace’. But if I were to ask them to speak on the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna or the Lord Buddha, it would provoke strong protests in the congregation. I was aware that some members of the congregation were not too happy that ‘their minister’ was ‘present at Hindu worship’ even if it was to give the Easter message. They would rather it was done in the market square.

In such a context a Christian worshipping or even praying with a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim would be considered by many Christians as a ‘betrayal’ of faith or, if they are in a more charitable mood, as a ‘dilution’ of faith.”

- How far can you sympathise with the feelings of Wesley Ariarajah, and of his church?
- What anxieties or fears do, or might, Christians have about inter-faith relations?
- What experience do you have of meeting with those of other faiths?
- What has been the value for you of such meetings?

Meetings on a train

Wesley Ariarajah was taking a train journey with an elderly Hindu friend. During the journey some deeply committed young Christians boarded the train, handed out tracts and shared their testimonies. This is what happened:

“Soon the Hindu friend and I had the immediate company of one of the young persons. I was in shirt sleeves and was not recognizable as a Methodist minister. After giving us a tract, the young man offered to give us his testimony.

He had been drinking, smoking: he was often disobedient to his parents. He had led a bad life. Then he was introduced to Christ and his life was transformed. He knew he was saved and he was making the offer of salvation in Christ to us also.

There was no doubt that the young man had in fact undergone an experience of transformation. His testimony was genuine and sincere.

Once the young man had left us, I wondered what all this had meant to my Hindu fellow-traveller. “How did that come across to you?” I asked him.

“How old do you think this young man would be?” he asked me.

“Well, perhaps sixteen or seventeen,” I answered.

There was a silence. And then, the question: “Now that he has found salvation at the age of seventeen, what is he going to do with the rest of his life?” I was dumbfounded.

I often recall this when people talk about salvation. What is it that we are offering to the Hindu through our witness? How is it heard and understood within a world-view that has so little in common with ours? How can our witness be incorporated into a spiritual tradition that has stood the test of time through many centuries?

While it must be true that the young man had in fact “found Christ” and that had helped him to “repent” of his “sins” and to live a “new life” (the key words of the testimony), what was the nature of “salvation” he was offering to the sixty-some year old person who had been steeped in his Scriptures, seen the ups and downs of life, and would perhaps testify to many moments of awareness of standing in the presence of God? Where was the connection?

For him, all the life-experiences that awaited the seventeen-year-old would teach him about life and its true goal, what is worth pursuing and what is not, what leads to “Life” and what does not. For the