

What Next?

We hope you have been challenged through reading and reflecting on these passages and on the four themes of *Our Calling* : to increase awareness of God, learning and caring, to challenge injustice and mission and evangelism.

The themes are again explored in this way but through other writers in the *M:Guide Other Voices1*.

Other *M:Guides* available are:

Worship
Lost in Space? : Mission in A Plural Society
Other Voices 1
Priorities for The Methodist Church
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For more details or if you have any comments and questions contact:

***Chris Jones***  
***Training & Development Officer***

***Tel: 01522 754782***

***Email: [methodistjones@btconnect.com](mailto:methodistjones@btconnect.com)***

M:Guides

The **Methodist** Church 

Other Voices: 2

An exploration of *Our Calling*  
through contemporary Christian  
writings

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

## INTRODUCTION

This *M:Guide* is the second which sets out to help you hear Christian voices that have spoken during the last thirty years with integrity, charm, power and challenge.

The brief extracts from their writings obviously limit how well we can understand them, but the hope is that their words will strike a chord, spark a thought or open a new insight that will encourage you and your church to face the challenges of today more wisely and joyfully.

The 'Other Voices' each reflect one of the themes of '*Our Calling*'.

Having listened just a little to these 'Voices', we hope that you will develop an enthusiasm for discovering more about them, the churches and communities from which they speak.

Each section includes a range of questions and suggestions for thought or discussion. You do not need to feel under pressure to deal with them all. Select the ones that are most stimulating. It does not even matter if you do not use any of them, just so long as you work at giving the different voices the opportunity to speak to you. If the voice immediately appeals or not, stay with it and always try to identify a positive and practical response to its challenge.

Every member of the group should have a copy of this booklet and try to read the passages through before the meeting.

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- 'Our search for God' - 'the search of God for us'. How much do you think people today are searching for God? What evidence do you see of God, like the lion, searching for us? What might the church do to encourage or facilitate these two searches?
- Following the thought that the lion is God, Donovan suggests that this means God is present in some way in every situation before the evangelist arrives. How far do you agree with his conclusion? What evidence do you see for your view? How happy are you with Donovan's description of the evangelist's role? What are the consequences for the church?
- The passage ends with an honest admission of 'cultural blindness'. Our church is part of the culture we seek to evangelise. Do you think that makes our task easier or more difficult? Perhaps it is more painful but less complicated to be working as Donovan was with a completely different culture?

Bible:

- Make a list of some of the stories of evangelism and conversion you can remember from 'The Acts of the Apostles'
- What evidence do you find there that 'the lion is God'?
Two passages to get you started: Acts 8:26 - 40; 16:25 - 34

Acknowledgements

Permission has been granted for extracts from the following to be used:

Nine Modern Poets Ed. E.L. Blade Macmillan 1970
Selected Poems 1946-1968 R.S.Thomas Granada 1973
God: His and Hers E. Moltmann-Wendell & J. Moltmann
SCM 1991
I am My Body E. Moltmann-Wendell SCM 1994
Christianity Rediscovered V.J.Donovan SCM 1982

The lion is God. Of course. Goodness and kindness and holiness and grace and divine presence and creating power and salvation were here before I got here. Even the fuller understanding of God's revelation to man, of the gospel, of the salvific act that had been accomplished once and for all for the human race was here before I got here. My role as a herald of the gospel, as a messenger of the news of what had already happened in the world, as the person whose task it was to point to "the one who had stood in their midst whom they did not recognise" was only a small part of the mission of God to the world. It was a mysterious part, a part barely understood.

It was a necessary part, a demanded part – "woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." It was a role that would require every talent and insight and skill and gift and strength I had to be spent without question, without stint, and yet in the humbling knowledge that only that part of it would be made use of which fit into the immeasurably greater plan of the relentless, pursuing God whose will for the world cannot be thwarted. The lion is God.

It was going to be a decidedly difficult task bringing the Christian gospel of forgiveness, and the Christian understanding of salvation to a culture so different from my own, a task calling for extreme care and delicate caution and much humility. So many mistakes could be made. Americans can sometimes be victims of the most incredible culture blindness. I should know. I am one of them."

Reflection:

- How do you react to the two descriptions of faith? What lessons are there in this for the church, our teaching and evangelism?
- Vincent Donovan was facing a crisis of faith because of doubts he was developing about the nature and possibility of his evangelistic task. What, if anything, provokes doubts for you about the church's evangelistic task today? How do you cope with such doubts? What would you say to others who may be having doubts?

VOICE ONE ...TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF GOD...

R. S. THOMAS

R. S. Thomas is one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. He was born in 1913 and died in 2000. He worked as an Anglican clergyman in his native Wales. His poetry is always demanding because of his ruthless honesty in facing the gloom of the world. Yet it is in the gloom and shadows that a profound awareness of God develops, glimpsed characteristically in the suffering of the cross.

You may like to begin this session by reading these three poems aloud, and share your reactions to them before you turn to the reflection. Just hearing the poems has a special power, and too much analysis is as likely to diminish your appreciation as to enhance it.

The Musician

A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin,
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

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### **In a Country Church**

To one kneeling down no word came,  
Only the wind's song, saddening the lips  
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;  
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,  
Bats not angels, in the high roof.

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,  
And saw love in a dark crown  
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree  
Golden with fruit of a man's body.

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A Blackbird Singing

It seems wrong that out of this bird,
Black, bold, a suggestion of dark
Places about it, there should come
Such rich music, as though the notes'
Ore were changed to a rare metal
At one touch of that bright bill.

'...I was sitting talking with a Masai elder about the agony of belief and unbelief....He pointed out that the word ... I had used to convey 'faith' was not a very satisfactory word in their language. It meant literally 'to agree to'. I myself knew the word had that shortcoming. He said to believe like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act. We should find another word. He said for a man really to believe is like a lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms (Africans refer to the front legs of an animal as its arms) pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.

I looked at the elder in silence and amazement. Faith understood like that would explain why, when my own was gone, I ached in every fibre of my being. But my wise old teacher was not finished yet.

"We did not search you out, Padri," he said to me. "We did not even want you to come to us. You searched us out. You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are, into the hills where we take our cattle for water, into our villages, into our homes. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched us out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God."

- Which men too are being torn apart today, and any reasons for them?
- What are the issues of justice and injustice here that need to be challenged?
- ‘The resurrection of the body’ is a significant part of Christian teaching. It indicates that there is some profound link between the way we deal with our bodies, and our hope of eternal life. How far do our bodies shape the people we are? What challenges to the life of the church may there be in this area?

Bible:

The Bible is very concerned with the body. Jesus shares his body in the sacrifice of the cross and we receive his body in our central act of sacramental worship. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 Paul describes his vision of the church as the body of Christ. What links can you see between Paul’s concern for the body of Christ and the concerns expressed by Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell?

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**VOICE FOUR...MISSION and EVANGELISM...**

**VINCENT DONOVAN**

Vincent Donovan’s story of his evangelistic work amongst the Maasai people, ‘Christianity Rediscovered’ is one of the classics of contemporary Christian writing. He describes how he realised that traditional missionary methods, both in the Roman Catholic Church to which he belongs, and in the protestant churches, had failed to make any creative impact amongst the Maasai. He set out to find a new way forward. It involved careful observation and listening to understand their culture, and then an agonising process of re-examining his faith and how to communicate it. He was able to share his struggles and self-doubt with the Maasai elders he was reaching out to. In this remarkable passage he recalls one such moment and the wisdom he learnt. It was this sort of experience that shaped his evangelism. He writes.....

You have heard it often, alone at your desk  
 In a green April, your mind drawn  
 Away from its work by sweet disturbance  
 Of the mild evening outside your room.

A slow singer, but loading each phrase  
 With history’s overtones, love, joy  
 And grief learned by his dark tribe  
 In other orchards and passed on  
 Instinctively as they are now,  
 But fresh always with new tears.

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Reflection:

The Musician

- Music helps to deepen the poet’s awareness. How important is music to you? Why is it important? What sort of music? How far do you think that music has a universal appeal? Music is a crucial part of our worship, and helps to create a sense of awareness – what might we have to learn from this discussion about music in worship?
- In the poem it is not only music but human skill, dedication, and achievement that contributes to an awareness of God. What human skills or achievements in art or technology deepen your awareness of God’s love? How important are words to you, in poetry, writing or preaching?
- The poet displays astonishing powers of observation. How important is such observation to our awareness of God? Is the power of observation a gift that only some people have, or a skill to learn and to be practised.....how might we learn?
- The poem culminates in a renewed awareness of the experience of the cross. There will be an opportunity to think about how central a place the cross holds in your understanding of God after thinking about the other poems, unless you would rather do it now!

In a Country Church

- The poet prays in a church building – how important for your prayer and worship are special buildings, with the right sort of atmosphere? Why?
- The poet is not ‘balked’ by silence – his own silence or God’s. How useful do you find silence in your personal prayers, and in worship? How do you cope, or, if you do not experience it, how do you help others to cope with the silence of God?
- Once again, beyond the decoration and atmosphere of the building, the cross becomes the focus. What are your reactions to the last lines – do they evoke a fresh awareness of the cross in any way?

The Blackbird

- The created world is the inspiration for this poem. How important is creation for your awareness of God? What parts of the created world most inspire you?
- How far do you find in creation the sort of paradox of darkness and beauty that this poem expresses?
- The last lines seem to suggest that the bird’s song is more beautiful when it is ‘made fresh with new tears’. What part do tears play in your awareness of God?

Two more questions in case you have not already discussed them:

- How important for you is the cross in your understanding of God and God’s love... and for what reasons?
- What are the implications of this discussion for the pattern and content of our worship?

Bible:

- Compare two or more accounts of the crucifixion. What differences can you identify, and which account do you find the most evocative? You will find the appropriate passages in Matthew 27:27 – 56; Mark 15:16 – 41; Luke 23:26 – 49; John 19:16 – 30.

At all events, beauty is a diffuse notion, and it arises among those who look at women and is fed by their fantasies. It cannot be assumed that women want to and are able to free themselves from these dreams and their fantasies. But it is to be expected that new attention to their body will also make them freer in their perception of themselves and more independent from compulsions to beauty. Their dignity does not lie in the imitation of models but in the development of their person. But precisely here there are difficulties today.

Many women feel that they are being torn apart. The chance of entering many spheres of work previously reserved for men, and in addition the need to maintain their traditional responsibility for housekeeping and children, creates burdens which set off alarm signals in the body. The typical modern illnesses of anorexia and bulimia appearing in the industrial nations, which occur almost only among women and girls, are signs that the female body does not fit into this culture stamped by male competitiveness and is rejecting maturity and growth, while on the other hand it is again tormented by hunger and a desire for life.”

Reflection:

- How far do you agree with these views? Which are the parts you respond to most? Is there anything you would like to add?
- In your opinion, how far is it true that ‘men take pride in suffering...’?
- ‘It cannot be assumed that women want to and are able to free themselves from these dreams and fantasies ... Their dignity does not lie in the imitation of models but in the development of their person.’ How much do you agree with these two statements? What difficulties are there in dealing with them? What, if anything, can the church do to help pastorally?
- ‘Torn apart’ in a ‘culture stamped by male competitiveness’. How far do you think this is accurate? Can you identify any ways in which this is expressed?

VOICE THREE ...TO CHALLENGE INJUSTICE...

ELISABETH MOLTMANN-WENDEL

Amongst the leading Feminist theologians of today is Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel. You may have guessed by now, Jurgen Moltmann is her husband! They have written a number of books together, but this passage comes from one of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's own books 'I am My Body'. The passage deals with a highly topical issue, the image, expectations and demands with which today's culture surrounds the human body. In this section she focuses on the woman's body, and begins by quoting from an adviser on marriage and family life that medical practices and therapies are resorted to predominantly by women. She continues....

...Women are seismographs for changes in culture, and their bodies are the places where conflicts become unmistakably evident. According to the statistics, on average men die six years earlier than women. This can be related to the pride men take in suffering as opposed to women and their 'instability'. But it is better seen as a threatening lack of sensitivity to one's own body.

'Women pay more attention to their bodies,' says Horst Eberhard Richter. 'They also notice symptoms more clearly than men. In surveys women always have more complaints than men, though men are often ill and also die considerably earlier'

For many, a woman's body is the embodiment of beauty. But if we look closer this notion is deceptive, since women's bodies differ widely. There is the elegant body of the small gymnast, the heavy body of the pregnant woman and the bowed body of the old woman.

Moreover at all times people have had different dreams about the body: at one time it was the baroque, plump, woman's body, today people look for sporting, dynamic figures.

VOICE TWO ...LEARNING AND CARING...

JURGEN MOLTMANN

Jurgen Moltmann is one of the greatest European theologians of the late twentieth century. His writings place a special focus on the Cross. One of his earliest books was provocatively titled 'The Crucified God', a theme to which he constantly returns. After the last session that pointed to the cross, we turn to Moltmann to help us learn and grow a little more in our understanding of the crucifixion.

The Comfort of the Crucified

"At the centre of the biblical traditions stand the story of the passion of Israel and the story of the passion of Jesus Christ. The God who led Israel to freedom and made his covenant with this people is not an impassible God, but a God with the passion and the zeal of love. So in the passion story of their people the rabbis constantly also discovered the passion story of the God of Israel.

As 'the Almighty', God is enthroned in heaven, but by virtue of his spirit he is at the same time in and with his people; he is particularly close to the poor and the humiliated, to widows and orphans. God is present in Israel through his Shekinah (indwelling); he suffers in the persecution of his followers, he goes into exile with the people and shares the torments of death with the martyrs. The God of the covenant is also Israel's companion in suffering. The experience of the pain and suffering of God in his own was and is the inexhaustible power which preserves the people from despair and keeps their disappointed hope alive.

Christians have recognized and believed something similar in the story of the passion of Jesus Christ. The sufferings of Christ are the sufferings of God himself. God himself becomes human. God himself becomes this person and enters into the passion of the cross on Golgotha. God assumes this humanity and embraces it with his divine being. God assumes the situation of the godforsakenness of lost men and women and takes their death on himself.

This human God is near to all human beings in their dereliction. Women and men are unconditionally accepted into the community of God wherever they are. There is nothing that could exclude them from the community of the human crucified God. Jews and Christians can speak of the pain and suffering of God and in their own suffering and pain experience deep inner communion with God because they believe in the God who is merciful. The God, whose being is love goes out from himself by virtue of his love. His love for his creation and the human beings whom he has created in his image causes him suffering. He suffers in the contradictions of his creatures, he suffers in being shut out by his creatures and he suffers for his creatures in infinite patience, because he keeps hoping for the free conversion and grateful homecoming of his creatures. So God in his love is omnipotent and at the same time impotent. His love triumphs in hope and suffers in patient waiting.

What does this God mean for people who suffer and have to look on suffering?

Those who suffer without reason always begin by thinking that they have been forsaken by God and all that is good. Those who cry out to God in their suffering in essence join in Jesus' dying cry, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' When they recognise this, they also recognise that God is not that dark adversary in heaven to whom they cry, but in a very personal sense is the human brother who cries with them and the Spirit which cries in them and will cry for them once they are put to silence.

It is said that Catherine of Siena once cried out: 'Where were you, my God and Lord, when my heart was full of darkness and confusion?' And she heard the answer, 'I was in your heart, my dear daughter.'

Reflection:

- In what two senses does Moltmann use the word 'passion'? How comfortable are you with his description of the 'passionate' God? Are some of us by nature more or less 'passionate' than others? If so, how far might that limit our understanding of the nature of God?

- The early church firmly rejected the notion that God felt emotions, and could suffer. They insisted that God is 'impassible'. This was in some measure because of their context among religions where gods were highly emotional, unstable, immoral and unpredictable! Christians would not compromise the complete reliability of God. Are there any ways in which the two insights into God's character can be held together? In your opinion, what do we gain, and what do we lose if we hold on to the notion of an 'impassible' God?
- How far do you agree with Moltmann that 'God is particularly close to the poor and the humiliated, to widows and orphans.'? What are the possible implications of such a claim – especially for our church life?
- At the end of the first paragraph, Moltmann seems to suggest that the companionship or solidarity of God in the sufferings of the people somehow transform their suffering into hope. How do you respond to that suggestion?
- God's suffering in and with all people means that no one is cut off from God. How can the church best express that insight in its life and worship?
- Moltmann describes God as both 'omnipotent' (all-powerful) and 'impotent'. How helpful do you find that paradox?
- How much comfort do you think the story of Catherine of Sienna would bring to you or to others in times of difficulty?
- How helpful do you find Moltmann's insights about the suffering God as a response to questions we are so often asked about why God allows suffering?

Bible:

- Make a list of the Bible stories you can remember that suggest that God or Jesus is (a) passionate, (b) unchanging and unemotional.

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