



Discipleship Pathways: Learn

Today as a circuit we've started our journey through our latest staff-produced reflection booklet. For the next six weeks in the booklet and in our services we're journeying through the remaining six "Discipleship Pathways" described in "A Methodist Way of Life." This follows on from the first six which we looked at across the circuit last year.

In this service we will be considering what it is to be disciples (as individuals and as groups) who learn, who are open to growing through that learning, and subsequently what it is to encourage and share that learning with those around us.

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship and reflection let's pray the words of William Watkins Reid (Singing the Faith number 501):

Help us, O Lord, to learn the truths your word imparts,
to study that your laws may be inscribed upon our hearts.

Help us, O Lord, to live the faith which we proclaim,
that all our thoughts and words and deeds may glorify your name.

Help us, O Lord, to teach the beauty of your ways,
that all who seek may find the Christ, and make a life of praise.

Hymn

Our opening hymn reminds us of the breadth and beauty there is to learn about our faith. As we contemplate and recall the love about which we've learned let us recommit to the closing line, that we might in this space seek to be deeper learners of God:

Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love dwells in the heart of the
Father above.

Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell, joyfully
came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost, saving, redeeming at
measureless cost.

Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet; why do
they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love dwells in the heart of the
Father above.

Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
come and abide,
lifting my life, till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be lowly and humble, a learner of
thee.

Robert Walmsley, STF 443

Reading:

Our reading for this service is Proverbs 1:1-7. The following is how it is written in the New Revised Standard Version. As you read it consider what it says to you about the theme of “Learning”.

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

Prologue

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise, too, hear and gain in learning
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Maybe one day...

Six months into my youth work career I asked my then line manager to write me a reference to help me get into Bible college to do my degree. In some ways I knew that the application itself was me chancing my arm as my A-Level grades were not at the level that would be needed to do the degree. Little did I realise that asking this particular person for a reference could potentially jeopardise my chances further! Within the reference was the line “Marc’s not as good as he thinks he is, but he will be one day!”

In fact, that reference turned out to be quite helpful, not only for the process of getting into Bible college, but it has actually stuck with me every step along the way since. It’s the line that comes to mind every time I begin to get complacent and arrogant, when I slip into those old ways of thinking I’ve got it all sorted. And I think it’s going to be just as important as I look at moving forward into the next season of life as well.

So why do I tell you that? Well, I’m a big believer in the brilliance of humanity, and our potential to be even better. John Wesley described it as the pursuit of holiness that we might, through the providence of God’s grace, become all we could be. The problem comes when we have a mindset like 19-year-old me and we pretend we know everything, (I say “pretend” because I always knew deep down that I didn’t know everything, but I didn’t like to admit it to myself or anyone else!) and decide that there is not further room for learning and growth, for deeper potential to be released. Just as Wesley believed that holiness was achievable for anyone who put enough weight and value on the love of God, following Jesus and heeding the Spirit by the means of grace, so I too have confidence that, whilst I’m still not as good as I thought I was then, I still have the potential to be... and to be even better than I ever dreamed! But that all begins, as the wisdom of Solomon suggests, with being wise enough to add to my learning.

What is it that we’re learning though? What does it mean for us to grow as disciples? The whole purpose of discipleship is to become like the one you are following. As Christians the person we follow is Jesus. This involves us watching, noticing, adopting, adapting, growing and learning. Learning to live and love like Jesus, in line with the heart of God. True learning as disciples transforms heart, mind, soul and all of life: it releases our fullest potential.

I wonder...In what ways has your learning been added to down the years? What potential has been released, and what potential might be waiting to be released? Who were you, and who are you becoming?

Hymn

Whilst we're thinking about our journey as disciples and how we learn and grow let's consider a primary school classic! Perhaps in that simple childhood wisdom that has been belted out in assembly halls across the years there is a deeper truth about what it means for us to stay humble enough to learn and grow as we travel with God:

One more step along the world I go,
one more step along the world I go;
from the old things to the new
keep me travelling along with you:

*and it's from the old I travel to the new;
keep me travelling along with you.*

Round the corners of the world I turn,
more and more about the world I learn;
all the new things that I see
you'll be looking at along with me:
and it's...

As I travel through the bad and good,
keep me travelling the way I should;
where I see no way to go
you'll be telling me the way, I know:
and it's...

Give me courage when the world is rough,
keep me loving though the world is tough;
leap and sing in all I do,
keep me travelling along with you:
and it's ...

You are older than the world can be,
you are younger than the life in me;
ever old and ever new,
keep me travelling along with you: ...
and it's...

Sydney Carter, STF 476

Education Theory

Gone are the days (largely) where children are expected to sit in silence in a classroom for 6-7 hours and listen to a single teacher, or read and recite what they have "learned." Educational theorists have recognised that whilst such models of learning work for some young people, they are ineffective with the masses. Instead, there are increasingly opportunities for interaction, discussion, independent learning, presentations, videos, posters, songs, creative understandings and interpretations. The list goes on! Even in our churches we have begun to adopt some of the principles of education theory in the way we plan, deliver and interact with our regular worship services. For example, I'm sure many of you are glad that I'm not going to turn up and preach at you for a solid 30 minutes¹ (or more!)... But we also often have access to various forms of technology, styles of services, chances for discussion, and a variety of voices to lead our thinking.

Picking up that first example, a 30-minute sermon. At a very basic level, research around our attention span suggests that typically we can manage 10 minutes of listening to someone before we zone out... And even then I'm assuming that is listening to someone more interesting than me!² (Interestingly, to me, our ability to keep our attention on screens is even less: The research suggests that when working with screens we typically find ourselves drifting with our attention every 47 seconds!)

Dig a little deeper and we discover that our attention span is further affected by other factors, including our physical and mental health, the environment in which we are listening, the complexity

¹ Instead, I regularly manage to fit 30 minutes worth of sermon into a service by splitting it into 3 10-minute sections... Take this service, for example, where I have three single pages of my own reflections, rather than a three consecutive-page essay!

² <https://leaders.com/articles/productivity/how-to-increase-attention-span/>

of what we're listening to, our age (we know children have a short attention span, but as adults it is proven that our attention span tends to decline with age), and our motivation for engaging with the subject at hand.

And that's just the research around sitting and listening. The reality presented by education theory is that many of us actually learn in ways other than just listening to a lecture-like sermon, or reading a written service. Some of us are "Auditory" learners benefitting from listening to speakers or music. Some are "Visual" learners who find images and pictorial representations helpful. Some appreciate "Verbal" learning, including the written and spoken word. Some are "Physical" learners who need to have hands-on engagement or movement. Some of us work "Logically" with numbers and statistics, but others prefer "Stories" - either real or fictional - to help us understand a point. Some of us like "Social" learning with other people, but others find it easier to learn things "Independently."

As you consider that list you'll realise that you probably don't fit into a box with a single one of those. It's possible that different learning styles help you at different times, and sometimes you need more than one style to help learn something.

The beauty of the Christian faith and the journey on which we are invited as disciples, is that nearly all of the above is represented, and there is provision for us all to learn. We are called to be disciples - apprentices, hands-on learners - following an example in Jesus. Jesus himself is the physical and visual outworking of God's "Word". The Holy Scriptures we have as a source of the knowledge of God. We are called to do this both as individuals and collectively as church. We are encouraged to share stories and respond to facts, to see the statistics and to speak of justice.

Hymn

The next hymn specifically focusses on the "words" of God, but I want to encourage you to consider that those words aren't just about text. They're about any way in which we might develop an understanding and learn of God. It's the way we see love, feel the prompts of the Spirit, hear the Gospel proclaimed and testify it being revealed in the world. It is all the ways our soul is inspired bringing us peace, hope, joy and love:

Your words to me are life and health;
they fortify my soul,
enable, guide, and teach my heart
to reach its perfect goal.

Your words to me are full of joy,
of beauty, peace, and grace;
from them I learn your blessed will,
through them I see your face.

Your words to me are light and truth;
from day to day they show
their wisdom, passing earthly lore,
as in their truth I grow.

Your words are perfected in One,
yourself, the living Word;
within my heart your image print
in clearest lines, O Lord.

George Currie Martin, STF 164

Prayers

Let us spend some time in prayer. These prayers will be made up of your thoughts and responses to the questions below, finishing off with the Lord's Prayer. Leave some space between each section of questions to consider what your heart and mind are saying to you, and what the answer might look like in your life.

What has God been trying to teach you this past week? When have you learned from God's promptings? Where have you failed to remember the lessons you have previously learned about what it is to "love God and love your neighbour as yourself"? How does it feel to be reminded of

God's forgiveness through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit to keep us learning how to love moving forwards?

What groups in our world find it difficult to learn? What might need to happen for people to have more access to good education? How might God help those who find learning difficult because of their health, environment or circumstance?

Are there people in our world who think they have nothing left to learn? What would happen if more of those in positions of leadership in our world were humble enough to seek to learn from those they are privileged to lead?

Who do you know that needs to learn of the love of God? How might such learning transform their lives? How could you share or enact the love of God with them this week?

We draw our prayers together with the prayer Jesus' disciples have learned for generations:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.

AMEN

Lifelong Learning

"Lifelong learning" is 'the ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of learning for either personal or professional reasons.'³

At various stages through life, I've had those moments of being impatient to reach the end of education. At each stage of school (and I was in a three-year system) I was desperate to be done with the learning. Once I was at college I had times of appreciating it, but others where I couldn't wait for the learning to be done. I am already occasionally guilty of wanting the next stage of my potential academic journey to just be done already so I can get on with just doing things... But I often find myself reminded of the need and value of lifelong learning.

We all have things and interests that we get excited about and find ourselves wanting to learn more about. We do that by investing our time in reading, watching, listening, talking, researching the things that interest us. I've lost count of the number of times I've had reason to use the phrase "every day is a school day" or the revelation that I've suddenly made it to being "Today years old" without realising something about the world.

And yet I think sometimes we forget to do the same with our faith. Sometimes we know we are Christians because we once said the right words or were baptised. We are content that we have made it on our journey because we attend church each week, make our tithed offering and receive our membership ticket. I know there are times when I've sat in the pew, or even stood in the pulpit, and the words I have heard, wanted to hear, or the ones I have preached are comfortable ones that tell me what I already know, rather than actively seeking something to learn in order to grow myself and my understanding of God as a lifelong disciple.

³ Department of Education and Science (2000). "Learning for Life: Paper on Adult Education"

Maybe as disciples we should continually be seeking to add to our learning, remembering humbly that we're "not as good (or holy) as we think we are, but will be one day." Maybe as disciples we need to remember that this is a voluntary journey, and it doesn't matter what is being said from the front or what we read, but if we're not wise and willing enough to open our hearts and minds we will never hear and learn what God might want to teach us. Maybe as disciples we need to be self-motivated enough to not just turn up on a Sunday and sit in our seats (or stand in the pulpit!) but to also do our own exploration and study deeper and beyond in our daily lives, be that individually or with others.

When we embark on the pathway of learning as disciples we find ourselves able to recognise where we have grown along the way, and how we have been able to transform knowledge into action that shows the love from God that we have encountered and value to the world around us.

The true measure of how well we have learned something is our ability to put it into practice and to teach it to other people... But that sees us perhaps straying into a pathway for another week.

Hymn

Our final hymn in this written service expresses a commitment to lifelong learning, and the application of our learning. I wonder what that looks like for each of us as individuals, and for us collectively?

Show me how to stand for justice:
how to work for what is right,
how to challenge false assumptions,
how to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
in a world so full of greed,
showing your immense compassion
by the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
whether given or received —
for my need has not diminished
since the day I first believed:
let me seek no satisfaction
boasting of what I have done,
but rejoice that I am pardoned
and accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
modelled on your living word,
in humility submitting
to the truth which I have heard.
Make me conscious of your presence
every day in all I do:
by your Spirit's gracious prompting
may I learn to walk with you.

Martin Leckebusch, STF 713

Blessing

Our blessing comes from the chorus of another song in Singing the Faith (number 477) by Graham Kendrick and Steve Thompson:

As we journey onwards, may we learn what it is to:

dance to the beat of God's heart,
move in the power of God's Spirit,
walk in the light of God's presence,
love with God's heart of compassion,
trust in the word of God's promise,
hope in the day of God's coming,
dance to the beat of God's heart.

AMEN