

Embedding practices of justice, dignity and solidarity within the pastoral theology curriculum of student ministers.

The background.

As a new tutor at the Queen's Foundation for Theological Education, Birmingham and as someone previously holding leadership responsibilities within the Methodist Church, I began to wonder how it might be possible to integrate Methodist Church policies of inclusion within my teaching. I was conscious that the Methodist Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity, that had been received by the Methodist Council and discussed at the Methodist Conference of 2021, had the stated vision that 'the leadership of the Church will reflect the diversity of its membership across all its life and structures, with processes and practices which ensure that people are treated with justice and dignity is upheld.' (1). The report included a stated intention that 'leaders, in all spheres of church life, model behaviors that embrace diversity, inclusion and justice' (2) Whilst the church's stated strategies were envisaged as spreading across the whole of the Methodist Connexion, there was no direct reference in the document to learning institutions that were training and forming Diaconal and Presbyteral ministers. I began to ponder how I could both embody good practice and integrate the intentions of the church into my teaching. I began to reflect on the unit of Pastoral Theology for which I was directly responsible, Common Awards units TMM 2501 and TMM3521 in which I was focussing on the Human Lifecycle. My intention was to embed good practice into my teaching and to discern if there was any broader learning for the College. To this end I was awarded a Seedcorn grant.

The process so far.

In the booklet 'Working Towards a Fully Inclusive Methodist Church' (3) it was indicated that 'The Methodist Conference has agreed that good conversations are key to our listening and learning from one another.' It has therefore been my intention to initiate a series of conversations in order to discern where I could find connections between the work of the Connexional team and the lived experiences of my students. These conversations would seek to familiarize myself not only with the Methodist Church reports but also further developments since the Conference of 2021.

An initial conversation with Rev Dr Jill Marsh, Inclusive Church Implementation Officer, who gave me some initial insight into the work being rolled out across the Methodist Connexion. She highlighted the need for systemic and cultural change within the church, both locally and nationally. She emphasized the need to broaden our understanding of accessibility and to enable a wider understanding of 'unconscious bias'. She suggested the concept of 'solidarity circles' as a methodology for my on-going enquiry. To this end I offered an open invitation to the students in the daytime teaching group for two round table conversations to reflect on the content and teaching of the unit as they were experiencing it.

1. Justice, Dignity and Solidarity – a vision statement. Methodist Church, 2021 p.3
2. Ibid. p.4
3. Working towards a Fully Inclusive Methodist Church. Methodist Church, 2021

Day time student solidarity circle 1

This 'solidarity circle' comprised 7 members who had either self-selected or been invited to participate by a fellow student. The intention of the conversation was stated and also the intended outcome ie to write a report in fulfilment of the Seedcorn grant, to reflect on my own teaching methods and the content of the Pastoral theology course and to share learning with the College and the Methodist Church as appropriate. It was made quite clear that I had no personal agency to enact changes other than in my own practice but it was hoped that the conversation would feed into further reflection for both the college and the church. It was explained to each participant that engaging with the conversation was their own choice as was the nature of what they shared, that confidentiality would be respected by myself and other members of the group and no attributable comments would be disclosed. There was verbal consent by each participant to these parameters.

The conversation was wide-ranging. It was apparent that there was a diverse number of disabilities within the student group, in particular dyspraxia, dyslexia and autism as well as physical impairment. The focus of the conversation was on teaching methods and the need to be inclusive by using a range of teaching styles. It was acknowledged that the previous year of learning on Zoom because of the Covid pandemic had hindered this but that now we were all physically in the classroom there were opportunities to do things differently. Those who favoured more structured information were appreciative of Moodle resources and found these aided their inclusion. Others expressed the need for input that was more creative, exploratory and discursive.

I enquired what made the classroom inclusive and the group perceived the need for the tutor to 'hold a safe enough space for honest conversation'. It was noted that sometimes it was only the extroverts that got 'heard' in a larger group and that physically re-arranging the classroom to enable small group discussion would help a wider participation and present a more invitational, collaborative pedagogy.

Following this feedback from Solidarity Circle 1 I began to change both the physical set-up of the classroom and the style of input. Previously, I had let a powerpoint give the structure to the teaching and used it to provoke conversations within the student group. Now I used a variety of poetry, film and questions to be the starting point and let that lead towards the more formal texts and handouts on the Moodle pages.

At the end of the unit the feedback reflected how this had been perceived by the group, with the majority appreciating the change of style but two finding it unhelpful. One student in particular indicated that it had not been helpful in relation to planning her assignment. However, the high grades of assignment marks were noticeable, with a high proportion of students gaining marks of over 60%

Reflection

There were a number of learning points for me.

Firstly, I was surprised at the range of hidden diversity within the room. I had been aware that a number of students were out as gay, two students had African heritage and one had Asian-British heritage. I was also mindful that there would be abuse survivors within the group (there are in every group). However, I had not been conscious of the hidden learning challenges facing the group, and wondered whether I should have picked this up in advance of the teaching. The students had indicated that it always fell to them to disclose their needs which sometimes felt like another burden when they were already struggling.

Secondly, I noticed that when I changed the physical lay out of the classroom the dynamic of discussion also changed with the students participating more easily and openly in smaller groups. However, this left less time for the more formal input and some felt that this did not help them with their assignment despite the information being available to them on Moodle. I reflected that, with adult learners, there was a high level of human experience and wisdom 'within the room' and that the students were learning from each other as well as from me. I decided to be more explicit about this when teaching the part-time cohort.

Thirdly, I noted that there were two 'faces' to the inclusion agenda within the classroom setting, namely how *individual student needs* could be accommodated within the teaching environment and how the *content of the course* itself could reflect inclusivity.

Weekend students, solidarity circle 2

The course for the weekend students is much more compressed as the bulk of the in-person input must be delivered within two weekends. This did not give scope for using film or extensive creative activities. I ensured all handouts were available on Moodle in advance of the teaching and also that there were hard copies available for those who struggle with on-line resources.

Although students arrive for weekend sessions visibly tired after their week at work or with family and journeys to college, there is immediate engagement with the learning environment. I deliberately used a variety of starting points for discussion and endeavored to facilitate a safe space for all to participate. In this group are a significant number of women with Zimbabwean and Caribbean heritage and one wheelchair user. Two others have significant physical needs. I did not move the furniture as the room is not easily rearranged, and we still needed to be Covid compliant, but small group work gathered around the existing tables.

Mindful of the conversation I had with solidarity group 1, I gave clearer signposts to the key texts but then gave a variety of starting points for discussion – eg a quiz on Fowler's stages of faith, a poem about death and dying, a child's story book for images of heaven. The quality of the sharing was profound with a particularly rich contribution from the Zimbabwean students who were able to share insights from their heritage both in Africa and in the UK. These students not only reflected on their own experience and heritage as lone parents but were also able to draw us to consider relationships and community in a different way.

Also over the weekend there were important contributions from an individual working with the transgender community and honest contributions across the group. Despite the emotional challenges of discussion subjects such as reproductive loss, the students remained engaged and seemed energized by their learning.

Reflection:

I noticed that the students in this group were drawing widely from their lived experience (one is a hospice chaplain, one a nursing sister, one a student advisor). They were able to provide diverse examples of the life course such as a pastoral conversation with someone who had suffered due to FGM and someone who had reproductive decisions to make before gender realignment.

We were able to talk theologically about what we implied if we said 'God has a plan' and we challenged some 'heterosexual norms' within the church's language as well as for the students themselves.

I began to ponder the resources that I was offering to the students: were they too white, middle class and heterosexual? The core texts of Erikson (4) Feldmeir (5) and Fowler (6) definitely offered a white, individualistic critique of human development that was being challenged by those of African, Asian and Caribbean heritages within the group. In particular we were brought to a different understanding of 'the individual' by the critique of black colleagues who pushed us towards a collective understanding of community through their explanation of different ways of grieving within their own communities.

Finally, there was acknowledgement of my own insecurity. Some teaching colleagues had implied I am 'more of a practitioner than an academic'. This had felt quite belittling but I began to ponder what this meant in practice. Certainly, I have not been part of an academic institution in a teaching capacity before but I sensed there was something deeper here. My academic research has always taken an ethnographic approach, so that the stories around would be the source from which the subsequent theology would emerge. This was the method I was bringing to the classroom. Yet the apparent assignment-led pedagogy seemed to make this seem irrelevant to the task in hand. If we wrote a poem then we 'weren't really engaged with serious academic learning'. This led me to explore some of the reflections of Emmanuel Lartey on de-colonisation and intercultural approaches to pastoral theology ...

Next steps?

Learning from Emmanuel Lartey

In his book 'Postcolonializing God (7) Emmanuel Lartey outlines seven characteristics of African post-colonialization activities:

- Counter-hegemonic – subversive and calling power into question
- Strategic – dialogical relationships between theory and practice and a desire for transformation
- Hybrid- multi-dimensional discourse with diversity as a hallmark
- Interactional and intersubjective – interacting with a variety of experiences
- Dynamic – issues are always in flux
- Polyvocal – interacting with many perspectives
- Creative – calling into being new forms of being, institutions and practice

4. Stevens, R. and Erikson E: *Shapes of Identity* (Palgrave, 2008)

5. Feldmeir, P. *The Developing Christian: Spiritual Growth through the Lifecycle* (Paulist Press, 2007)

6. Fowler, J *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. (Harper Collins, 1981)

7. Lartey, E. *Postcolonializing God*, (SCM Press 2013) p.121

Lartey points towards post-colonial pastoral care needing to put spirituality at the centre, to resist psychological and sociological reductionism and resist the individualism of the West. He says that

‘The aim of postcolonialising pastoral care is the cultivation of communal spaces in which all people can be safe, nurtured and empowered to grow ‘

and that the pastoral care giver will ‘seek to establish places of safety for all persons at risk of molestation, violence, discriminatory, or oppressive practices of any sort’. (8)

Reflection:

I began to notice the overlap between Lartey’s ‘characteristics of colonialization’ and the stated aims of the agenda posited by the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity document namely :

- For the rich diversity of people within the Methodist Church to be recognized as a cause of thanksgiving, celebration and praise
- A paradigm shift in the culture, practices and attitudes of the Methodist Church so that all Methodists are able to be full participants in the Church’s life;
- To eradicate all discrimination and coercive control within the Methodist Church and for all people to be treated justly and with dignity across the breadth of the Methodist Church (9)

I particularly noticed the paragraph in the Methodist JDS document relating to attitudinal change

‘Taking seriously attitudinal change means that the Church needs to review the way that it works, a way that is still determined by the privilege and power dynamics of an earlier generation. Put bluntly, the Church in too many places still operates with patterns devised by and for educated white men. Systemic change must therefore be explored alongside any cultural and attitudinal change.’(10)

In the light of this overlap I began to review the changes I had begun to make in the classroom. I could see that my first attempts to bring different starting points to the learning had enabled the polyvocal interaction particularly from those of African heritage. I also noticed (rather pleasingly!) the affirmation of theory and practice in Lartey’s analysis. I also began to ponder the concept of ‘places of safety’ in relation to the classroom. If a tutor is to embody and teach good pastoral practice then there is a need to create within the learning environment a place of safety. I understand this to be a place where a student is free to disagree, to bring personal story, to say if they don’t understand. With this in mind I initiated a conversation with three members of teaching staff – solidarity circle 3 – I was particularly interested in their experience of ‘flipping the classroom’ to see if this promoted Lartey’s principles and in particular whether it enabled a place of safety for students with diverse needs and experiences to learn good pastoral practice.

8. Lartey, E. *Postcolonializing God*, (SCM Press 2013) p.121

9. *Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity: working towards a fully inclusive Methodist Church.* Methodist Conference agenda (2021) p.753

10. *ibid* p.763

Solidarity circle 3

This conversation was with three other members of the new staff team at Queen's – two Methodists and one Anglican of whom two were presbyters and one a deacon, all women.

The conversation starter was about 'flipping the classroom' and whether this was a useful tool for inclusion. By 'flipping the classroom' we understood that the input for sessions would be available on-line before the classroom session and students would be expected to read and learn themselves from this input before the in-person discussion which would then reflect on this knowledge. We then went on to talk about 'shared teaching'.

The reflection on 'flipping the classroom' brought out a number of positive and negative points. It was acknowledged that releasing the in-person learning from input enabled space for wide ranging reflections and time to draw on the student's own experiences in the light of their on-line learning. In this way it was possible to give space for a number of different voices to be heard and stories to be shared and mutual learning to be experienced. It was also acknowledged that, for some learners, a video of input that can be watched several times before a session, allowed learning to be absorbed in a different way, difficult points to be re-visited and was helpful for slower learners. In short it saved a lot of 'scribbling in class' which disadvantaged some.

There were some questions, however about accessibility. In particular, that putting material on-line offered an accessibility of the medium but not necessarily of the content. There needed space in class for people to say 'I don't understand' and for things that had proved difficult to be explained. It was also noted that flipping the classroom presumes a level of competence to be able to teach yourself. This favours the more able students and can also encourage the lazier students to skip the learning that they do not see as relevant to their essay preparation. There was also acknowledgment of the extra work needed for those students who are working in their second or third language.

All the tutors preferred models of shared teaching, providing there was a mutuality to it. It was noted that sometimes the longer-serving tutors were perceived as more controlling of the input in class rather than genuinely sharing the classroom with newer colleagues, however where there was an equal balance then sharing the classroom was seen as both creative and beneficial.

There was also some discussion about 'movement', that is how not only the classroom input could use a variety of styles to enable participation but also that the whole of college life could be used to enhance classroom learning. For instance, one tutor moved from the lecture theatre to the chapel for part of the in-person input, another had encouraged walking and talking in the college grounds.

There was acknowledgement also that we didn't just want people to get certificates and degrees but we also wanted them to be good practitioners. However we DID want them to get their qualifications as well!

11. Lartey, E. *Postcolonializing God*, (SCM Press, 2013) p. 138

Reflection

Emmanuel Lartey says that pastoral theology is a “praxeological discipline” and that we stand in the (Methodist) concept of ‘practical divinity’ which is born out of our Wesleyan traditions.(11) My reflection following the conversation with tutors is that our classroom practice must embody what we are trying to teach. One positive way to do this would be to work alongside others to embody diversity within the tutors as well as the students. Clearly, our **starting point** must be diversity, justice and inclusion, not simply our desired end point.

Next steps?

Through these initial conversation groups I had identified three key areas for attention, namely, the diversity within the classroom, the need for inclusive content within the course and the need for the tutor to embody inclusion.

Diversity within the classroom.

In the conversation with students I had been surprised to discover the range of needs that lay hidden within the classroom. Students had indicated that they were at times reluctant to disclose needs relating to neurodiversity as they felt such disclosure could result in them being seen as a problem. Whilst dyslexia can be highlighted on the front page of an assignment other challenges are not necessarily revealed to the tutor leading the teaching and if known to the pastoral tutor they may not have shared this information more widely. If the needs are not known then it is difficult to make reasonable adjustments within the classroom for individual students. Adjustments can be made broadly, assuming that hidden needs are always present.

Conversation with Alison Earey, Learning Support Tutor, following a staff training day indicated that most students experiencing a range of learning challenges find a calm, empathetic classroom environment is the starting point for good learning. Mrs Earey also stated that giving students a wider range of starting points to access material was key. She indicated that reading out loud can help some people, giving notes in advance and consistent layout of Moodle pages was also important. In particular, she stressed the importance of not triggering bad memories of school in which a student may have been left feeling helpless or stupid.

There ensued some discussion on assessment methods which have to be consistent for the whole cohort. Whilst some students relish the challenge of book learning and long essays, others are more able to communicate their learning by visual or spoken means. However, the requirements of Common Awards do not currently allow for students to choose between assessment methods, and also offering a range of choices was seen to significantly extend and complicate marking for the tutor.

The content of the course

The teaching of the human lifecycle is a useful ‘hook’ for teaching pastoral care but is inadequate for adding nuance and intersectionality to learning. The course currently works through life from ‘childhood’ to ‘death and dying’ and of necessity makes broad claims for what happens at particular

life stages. However, this feels more and more like a white, middleclass, heterosexual starting point from which other experiences are seen as anomalies. The conversation groups have given me the urge to de-construct the course, but how to do this without sinking into chaos? I sense there is much for me to learn from students of African heritage about the starting point for pastoral care as community.

Embodying inclusion

I asked a group of colleagues how they felt that inclusion could be embodied in the classroom. One useful reflection was that this could be achieved by joint teaching whereby different voices and styles could be included in the input to the course. They also talked about the need for integration of learning across the topics – eg that the teaching of Church History could be broadened to include a wider understanding of slavery and colonialism. There was also an acknowledgement that at Queen's not all the learning happens in a classroom and that through shared worship, meals and community life there were opportunities to embody inclusion, listening and diversity. There was also a discussion about 'flipping the classroom' and how this might be conducive to some students' preferred styles of learning, whilst also acknowledging the added workload of putting resources on-line in advance of any in-person teaching. In general there was an intention to be as inclusive and diverse as possible but also an acknowledgment that inclusion takes time and thought and there is not always perceived to be sufficient space to make this an intentional process.

Conversation group with Methodist officers.

My final conversation group was with Rev Dr Jill Marsh and Mr Beavan Powell who are heading up the JDI agenda for the Methodist Connexion. I asked them what awareness of diversity they wanted to promote in new ministers and what stumbling blocks they saw. I also asked how ministers can nurture their own diversities and how they related their work to the learning at Queen's

The conversation started by asserting that humility is part of the JDI strategy – that we all have much to learn and should be asking open questions of ourselves and others. They indicated that an understanding of society was the starting point for inclusion, that we needed to understand the inherited lenses of State, family, education and theology. Again I heard the need to make 'safe spaces' to explore political, sociological and theological constructs that influence our understanding.

Mr Powell talked of the culture of silence that can go around violence and he cited the case of some black young people who had to plan a safe journey on a Sunday in order to attend Church. He emphasized the need to understand cultural norms and the implications of breaking them.

It was interesting to see the developing work that had stemmed from the original JDI report and the clear and accessible material being put onto the Methodist church website. This material stresses the personal responsibility for learning and culture change. The call for every Methodist to notice, listen and learn from diversity and to respond to discrimination wherever it is located. The website also provides a user guide to accompany the report and a course on unconscious bias. There is opportunity to make a personal commitment to culture change and the rolling out of a discrimination and abuse response system.

I felt humbled by the extent to which this work has been developed across the Connexion, via the website and the EDI representatives in Districts. However, I came back to the initial question of how the work of 'the Church' can be joined up with the formation and training of student ministers. There seems to be a disconnect that is important to notice and to bridge.

Final reflection:

My initial question was how to relate the Justice, Dignity and Inclusion report of the Methodist Church to one small module of teaching at Queen's but the query has led to a much wider exploration of what it means to embody and teach theology and to form new ministers with inclusion at their very core. I have continued to ask more questions than find answers!

The reason for the enquiry was that I sensed a disconnect between the work of the Methodist Conference and the college at Queen's. I hastily want to say that this disconnect is nobody's fault, it is simply the work of parallel structures who are doing their best to be inclusive.

For my own part I have been challenged to make inclusion the starting point of any teaching that I deliver. This will entail being aware of diversity at every point of the human story, not as anomaly but as a celebration of diversity. I intend to try harder to broaden the scope and structure of the course that I teach so that the intersectionality of race, gender, disability and age is integrated into the heart of all our learning. I also want to explore pastoral care as a community activity rather than a personal responsibility – in this I trust I can continue to learn from students of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

I intend also to continue to explore a range of 'starting points' for classroom learning, which will inevitably lead to examination of how Moodle pages are presented in order to enable all students to learn and flourish to the best of their ability. I sense my own awareness of diverse needs has been enhanced by this enquiry and, whilst I will never get it right, I intend to strive more diligently towards inclusion for all. I acknowledge that offering a range of starting points will be uncomfortable to most students sometimes and that this might impact on those who prefer factual learning for writing assessments.

In relation to the classroom, I have been reminded of the need to make a safe space for people to tell stories, share experiences and to disagree well. In this there is a need to allow enough time to hear the quieter voices and to enable those whose neurodiverse abilities need recognition and encouragement. Whilst there always need to be input from the tutor into the classroom, there also needs to be space to listen and learn from the knowledge and wisdom of the students themselves.

In relation to the College, I would want to encourage the work and learning that is being promoted by the Methodist Conference (and other ecumenical partner groups) to be able to speak into the formation of student ministers. It may be that this is something that could be considered by the Bridging into Ministry module or could form the agenda for the annual visit from the President and Vice President of the Conference. If we are preparing students to enter Circuit and fully appraised of current church thinking then it seems pertinent that this process starts in their formational years.

Thank you for the Seedcorn grant that has enabled this reflection.

Conversation group with the part-time cohort

Conversation group with staff members MB, CD,RS

Conversation group with Methodist officers.

Reflection on how to teach with an ethnographic perspective – flipping the classroom, decolonizing input, resisting hetero normality etc.

Reflection on how to make inclusion the starting point not the 'add on'