**A Methodist Way of Life service outlines**

**Before using this service outline,
read the notes on** [**how to use the sessions**](https://www.methodist.org.uk/mwoloutlines)**.**

**Learning and Caring**

The Methodist calling to ‘Learning and Caring’ contains three practices: learn, care and openness. While these are commitments we can practise and receive with all people, they particularly relate to how we connect and form community within the ‘community of believers’ – those who have committed to exploring a relationship with God. This does not just mean Methodist members, but may include people who attend groups run by the church, or friends and neighbours who are spiritually seeking but would not call themselves ‘Christians’. The commitments help us to support each other both practically and spiritually.

**Open**

**“We practise hospitality and generosity”**

**Key themes**

* We meet God in relationship with people. Being ‘open’ may include being open-hearted, open-minded, open-walleted and open-homed (all forms of generosity and hospitality).
* Hospitality may include learning about and from other people, as well as cooking meals or hosting parties. It’s not always us being hospitable to someone else – it’s a blessing to receive hospitality too.
* Generosity may involve money, but it doesn’t have to. We can be generous with our time, gifts and ideas. Sometimes, time is a more valuable currency than anything else.
* Though such generous openness may involve sacrifice, it is rarely right to give in such a way that we are unable to care for ourselves and our dependents.
* This must be a mutual practice. If we only give, we place ourselves in positions of power over others. Our task is to listen, recognise and be transformed by God at the margins.

**Relevant Bible passages**

Proverbs 19:17; Matthew 25:35-40; Luke 6:38; Acts 2:40-46, 20:35; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2, 16

**Background reflection**

There is a widely quoted African saying that can be translated, “A person is a person through other persons”. That can be put more emphatically still: We are truly human only in relationship with others – in generous and hospitable relationships with others. Every person is made uniquely in the image of God, and so we meet God in our relationship with other people.

Within the context of the Our Calling and A Methodist Way of Life, this commitment is an expression of ‘learning and caring’ – an activity for being together in Christian Fellowship. It is a partner to the commitment of service, which considers how we act in the world. Of course, we can be generous to all, and all may be generous to us. But just as the relationship we have with family and friends is deeper than the one we have with strangers,

we might expect our relationship with others in our church to be different than that in our wider community.

Generosity and hospitality can be expressed as acting with an attitude of ‘openness’. It may include being open-hearted, open-minded, open-walleted and open-homed. It

may involve a sharing of money, time, gifts, ideas, or possessions. A discussion of hospitality and generosity needs to consider the context of being a follower of Christ today and the challenges your community may be facing with regard to the need for hospitality and generosity. What is it people need, and how can you respond with the gifts God has given you? Perhaps you are a terrible cook, but could give away produce from your garden.

Often we focus on how we should be generous and hospitable. We can point to countless examples in the Bible. But it is important that these are mutual practices; that we receive as well as give. You might hate organising birthday parties, but have a friend who would be delighted to throw one for you. If we only give, we place ourselves in positions of power

over others. We can unintentionally set ourselves up as heroes, or sacrificial servants. But receiving is a blessing that can be transformational to us and to the people who give. We have no stories of Jesus welcoming people into his home, but many of the time he spent accepting invitations from others. Make a point of accepting from others, as well as giving. Our task is to listen, recognise and be transformed by God at the margins.

The story of the widow’s offering in Mark 12 is often given as an example of how generosity is not about the amount we give relative to others, but about heart-attitude: Do we give to show off to others, or out of a position of love for God and others? It has even been used to justify extreme sacrificial giving, as the widow gave “everything she had, all she had to live on”. But some commentators note that this story comes immediately after Jesus has condemned the temple scribes for “devour[ing] widows’ houses”. As churches, we must be aware of what we ask of people (whether money or time) and whether it is always right to ask for or accept what people may be prepared to give, even when it is not healthy for them.

Though generous openness may involve sacrifice, we should not ask someone to give in such a way that they are unable to care for themselves and their dependents.

The ‘live’ practice of MWOL commits us to living “in a way which draws people to Jesus”. While this should not be a hidden motive for our generosity and hospitality, we should be aware of the impression we give of the character of God by the way we both practise and receive an attitude of openness.

**Further notes**

* The caution in Romans 12:2 to avoid conforming to the patterns of this world has been used to refer to many things. Perhaps one of the most fundamental within post-modern society in the UK are patterns of self-interest and selfishness. For some of us, being open may be counter-cultural; for others, it might be accepting openness from others.
* Understandings of hospitality and generosity vary greatly between cultures – not just internationally, but within countries as well. We can learn from one another’s different practices so that we act out of relationship, not misguided intention. Being hospitable and generous calls for equal treatment of all, even when they’re different from us or if we are wary of their culture or origin.
* A story from South Africa by the Revd Dr Jongikaya Zihle, from *Proclaiming the Way*:

“A young man had been held in a detention centre where he had been kept cold and naked for fourteen days. He was suddenly released far from home, without any clothes. It was dusk as he ran from his captors towards the smoke-filled and dusty township nearby.

“A middle-aged woman ran out of her dilapidated shack dwelling to cover him with a blanket. As it grew darker, and he continued to run in the direction of home, a kind man offered him a t-shirt and a pair of short grey trousers. Still clutching the musty blanket, he was stopped by another fatherly figure who offered him food and shelter for the night (in a two-roomed dwelling with his wife and six children). In the morning, on his way to a delivery job, this stranger offered to take him home, a 23-mile diversion from his work route.

“All these people were unknown to the prisoner, but all were aware of how things were under the oppressive system in Apartheid South Africa, and anyone seeing someone in the young man’s situation would respond unquestioningly in offering generous care.

“This is my own story. The care and compassion, generosity and selflessness that I experienced at this difficult time contributed to making me the person that I am today. Without the willingness of these people to share of themselves, and to be hospitable to a stranger, I don’t know where my life’s journey would have taken me. Hospitality and generosity produced a burning heart, willing to heed the call to ‘do all the good I can, by all the means I can and in all the ways I can’ in a world in need of God’s love. That has been, and continues to be, the defining marker for a Methodist Christian to this day!”

**Song and hymn suggestions**

Anytime you need a friend – Mariah Carey

Come all you vagabonds (ultimate-guitar.com)

Come, my table is a meeting place (*StF* 581) *communion*

For all he came, for all he lived (*StF+)*

In this house all people will be welcome (*StF+)*

Let earth and heaven agree (*StF* 358)

Let us build a house where love can dwell (*StF* 409)

**Creative activity suggestions**

Place different kinds of sweets on chairs throughout the room. Vary the number of sweets on each chair and leave some chairs without any sweets. How do people respond? Without shaming anyone, reflect on people’s motives for giving away sweets, for keeping them, for asking for them, etc. Did people give away a sweet they didn’t want or their favourite sweet? Did people feel they could ask for any sweet or just take what was offered? Make sure that everyone has a sweet at the end!

**Discussion questions**

* How have you shown hospitality and generosity recently? Think about your money, time, gifts, possessions, and ideas.
* How have you received or accepted hospitality and generosity lately?
* Which do you find easier, being generous or accepting it? Why do you think this is?
* In Acts 2:44, “all who believed were together and had all things in common”. Some cultures may still live like this, but many do not. What could we learn from this posture of openness for our own Christian communities?
* What different understandings of hospitality and generosity do people in the group have? How can we learn from one another?
* What would you do differently about generously loving others and giving and receiving hospitality if we knew the world was ending tomorrow?
* Where is God encouraging you in hospitality and generosity? What holds you back?

**Prayer ideas**

Put four bowls on a table and give people four tokens (small pieces of paper, Lego bricks, etc). Add a sign to each bowl – receiving hospitality, giving hospitality, being generous, and accepting generosity. Ask people to place their tokens in the four bowls to either thank God for someone else, or to ask for guidance in their own practice.

Encourage each person to place the tokens in whatever way they want to. They might put one token in each bowl, all four tokens in one bowl, etc.

*Explore creative ways to pray with all ages, using the Methodist prayer cards, available as*[*a printed pack*](https://www.methodistpublishing.org.uk/books/EGIPC22/intergenerational-prayer-cards)*for meetings and events,*[*a PowerPoint*](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/28465/intergenerationalprayercards-smaller.pptx)*for church services and meetings or*[*as a PDF*](https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/28466/digital-prayer-cards-131222.pdf)*for digital use.*

**Ways to respond**

* Analyse your charity and church giving. Is God placing anything on your heart?
* Organise a social occasion for others in your church such as a meal or walk.
* Practise saying “yes” to offers of help, if this is something you find difficult. Think of it as a gift to them.