Ask Me Anything (AMA) sessions : A resource for learning

The Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity (adopted by Conference 2021) aims:

* to help the Methodist Church become as fully inclusive as possible, addressing matters of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and recognising this to be a crucial witness to the Gospel of God’s love for all in Christ.
* for the rich diversity of people within the Methodist Church to be recognised as a cause for thanksgiving, celebration and praise;
* 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;
* for a paradigm shift (a profound change) 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.

We believe that all people are made in the image of God.

We have always believed this but not always thought about it or lived it out!

We believe that as we learn about each other we learn more about God.

**‘Ask Me Anything’ is a way of learning from one another.**

* We hear from ‘Experts By Experience’… we hear to listen and to learn and, through our listening, to be changed by God, individually and together, in our attitudes and our practice.
* We provide a safe space for people to learn and ask questions. A space in which we accept that none of us are perfect and all of us have things that we need to continue to learn. A space in which we can allow ourselves to be challenged without judgement or criticism.
* It is not an opportunity to challenge someone or debate different perspectives.
* We recognise that, through conversation with one another,
God’s transformative and creative work can take place.

**Suggestions for running an Ask Me Anything session (AMA)**

* Remind people this is a big privilege and a big ‘ask’ of the Expert By Experience. It is an opportunity to hear what God might teach us through somebody’s life.
* Invite your Expert By Experience well before you advertise and agree with them what they are willing to offer, making sure you’ve agreed the role suggestions below, or your own version if you agree to have different ground rules
* Plan and advertise well in advance, including timings for the session
* Remember all the safeguarding processes and arrange for a chaplain to be present (or available on the ‘phone). Any sessions relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion can often ‘trigger’ difficult memories and emotions, especially where people feel they have not been heard in the past. Treat any safeguarding ‘disclosures’ as you would for any other cases.
* Plan for people to give feedback on the session. Request feedback on the session itself, in the aftermath of the event, and feedback a few weeks or months later, on the impact the session has had (if you work with the Learning Network to facilitate the event, the Learning Network will be able to provide two surveys for this purpose using Survey Hero)

**If you are hosting an AMA session**

* You will need to hold a safe space and be empathic to the feelings of those around you
* Begin and end with prayer, thanking God for the life of this person
* Set the expectations at the start of the session, including timings; any boundaries that have been agreed on what can be asked; that the Expert by Experience can decline to answer or leave at any time, without judgement; and that people are free to challenge anything you say in holding the safe space.
* Remind everyone of the agreed confidentiality of what has been said during the session
* Make it clear that people are free to leave at any time, without judgement
* Outline how to access the chaplaincy provision that is available during and after the event
* Recognise that you may also need to access chaplaincy after the event and be prepared for this
* If there are questions that you consider offensive, which use language in a way which portrays some people as the norm and other people as ‘other’ or ‘different’, or which you think might convey attitudes or values which run contrary to the inclusive love of God, then still allow the Expert by Experience to answer the questions, if they choose to do so. Following this, if you think something that has been said needs to be challenged, then do so. Do so in a way that promotes learning, rather than criticising the other person or making assumptions about what led them to ask the question. Be clear that you are speaking for yourself, not on behalf of those who have lived experience, or from a place of power over the person who asked the question
* Be prepared to model learning by allowing yourself to be challenged in anything you say or do and allow yourself to learn from others in the space. Ask your visitor to introduce themselves before you ask for questions
* Please provide feedback to the other organisers (who will share it with the Learning Network) both critical and positive and positively critical… honest feedback will help us ensure these events continue to improve

**If you are attending an Ask Me Anything learning opportunity**

* Please come with an open heart ready to be challenged and to learn. The goal is to achieve a safe space where you can ask anything without judgement, but the expectation is that you are open to be challenged and to learn
* Be aware that it is not someone else’s responsibility to educate you and be grateful to those giving up your time to help you in your own learning
* If there is something you wish to ask, please do so, even if you are not sure the best way to phrase your question. However, please consider the feelings of others in the language you choose and be empathic to those around you. If you are not sure whether you are phrasing things in the best way, be honest about that and be open to the challenge of others in enabling you to develop your use of language
* The experiences that the Expert by Experience shares are their experiences. Please do not share these stories outside of this space without the permission of the speaker
* Similarly, the questions asked by others are asked in a safe space, in a spirit of trying to improve their own learning. Do not judge them based on where they are in their journey, or share their questions outside of the space.
* Be committed to putting your learning into practice after the session
* Please provide feedback to the organisers, both critical and positive and positively critical… honest feedback will help us ensure these events continue to improve

**If you are offering to be an Expert by Experience (EBE) at an AMA session**

* Remember you can set your rules about what you are not willing to answer and agree these with the host in advance. You can set the boundaries of the ‘Anything’ you are prepared to be asked.
* You can set the boundaries as to whether your answers are for the session only, or whether others can share them more widely after the session
* Remember that, although people can ‘ask you anything’, you don’t have to answer and be ready to say so. You can challenge the assumptions behind a question, rather than answer it, though you are always free simply to decline to answer and you will not be compelled to justify this. It might be worth practising in advance, in case this happens
* In challenging questions, the language used or any assumptions that may lie behind questions, try to do so in a way that promotes learning and is not critical, judgemental or assumptive about the person who asked the question. If you are not able to do this, state this honestly and openly. Be prepared to explain your feelings when answering a question, though you are not compelled to
* Feel free to ask for ‘time out’ or to ask for a question to be repeated, or to pause while you put your answer together
* Remember that, although you may have previously agreed to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time, without judgement
* Remember that the event will have chaplaincy offered, and you are welcome to use this support if it would help you during or after the event
* Please provide feedback to your host (who will share it with the Learning Network) both critical and positive and positively critical… honest feedback will help us ensure these events continue to improve

**Extra advice for digital AMA sessions**

* Inform people of the etiquette for the session before you begin. Usually, this will mean that people have their microphones on mute when they are not speaking, and they digitally raise their hand if they wish to speak, to make it easier for the host to identify those who wish to speak.
* You should think carefully about recording an AMA session. The purpose is to create a safe space for learning and, even if they agree to being recorded, people may be less open in what they say if they know the session may be viewed more widely.
* If you do wish to record the session, you must ensure that you inform everyone of this plan in advance. Give everyone the opportunity to turn off their cameras prior to beginning recording. Inform everyone of the purpose of the recording prior to beginning recording. After the recording has been completed, share it with those present to get their consent before sharing it more widely.
* If you wish to share the learning from the session more widely but have decided against recording, an alternative option is to ask your Expert by Experience (EBE) to do a recorded interview after the event. A host can read an edited version of questions that came from the session, so you can share the learning without having to include all questions, use the same wording used when the question was asked, or identify the people who asked the questions. If you decide to do this, you should still get the consent of the participants to use their questions in this alternative context.
* If you decide not to record the session, you need to inform all attending and request that they do not record the session on their own devices.
* You could use the ‘Chat’ function of your online meeting for people to submit questions. If you do, be clear to everyone on the protocol. Depending on the type of online meeting, you could have participants submit questions to a moderator who will then ask them to the EBE (For example, Teams and Zoom both have a ‘live event’ format in which people can submit questions in a Q&A without them being automatically publically visible. In a standard Zoom meeting, people could submit questions via a Direct Message to one of the hosts). This would allow questions to be anonymous and for hosts to check the questions, and potentially discuss them with the participant, before they are put to the EBE. Depending on the circumstances of your session, you may find these options are an advantage in achieving your aims. Whatever format you decide to use, ensure you are honest with all participants about the format and the reasons for that format.
* You can use the ‘breakout room’ to have private discussions. This might be useful if you are able to provide chaplaincy during the session. You can also use this function to have a private discussion with someone in order to remind or clarify the ground rules for the session. If someone needs to be removed from a digital session for not sticking to the agreed ground rules, you can use the ‘waiting room’ function, which will still allow you to send messages to explain your decision.