

COMPLAINTS AND DISCIPLINE SYSTEM

Background Theology

The need of the Methodist Church for a complaints and discipline process stems from the imperfect nature of human beings. Taking this seriously challenges us to reflect theologically upon the ways in which we respond to matters of complaint and discipline, so that our response is informed by our understanding of scripture.

The Bible suggests that methods for airing grievances, resolving disputes and challenging behaviour have existed throughout the history of God's people¹. Processes for dealing with complaints and upholding the discipline of the church have formed part of the life of the Church since its early forms.²

The reality of the human condition is that human beings are imperfect, and God's image has become distorted. We make mistakes; we have prejudices and weaknesses; we act in ways which cause pain to ourselves and others. All humans have the potential for good, but in any community there is the potential for broken, damaged and abusive relationships. It therefore follows that each person has the right to be treated with dignity and respect, a right to be heard, and a right to complain if they feel that they have been treated unfairly, demeaned or dishonoured.

Discipline is one of the means by which shared values are declared and enacted. Far from being inconsistent with a loving God, discipline can enable personal growth and human flourishing. It is part of God's love and nurture. Mutual support, care and discipline represent different aspects of the love of God, and are part of discipleship.

No one is beyond the reach of God's love and salvation is there for all who turn to God. Forgiveness does not mean that the church, or the individuals involved, ought to ignore uncomfortable facts or behave as though the events which have occurred have not. Yet, as we are called to new life, we are also called to take responsibility for ensuring that the new life will be different and not put ourselves and others at risk.

As the Body of Christ the Church seeks to embody justice, and to challenge injustice. Complaints and discipline procedures are one means of searching for truth. Justice involves loving, honouring and respecting others, and ensuring that processes and procedures are accessible, consistent, fair and transparent. Justice is also dynamic, implying an active concern for those who are vulnerable, marginalised, or oppressed.

Through the complaints and discipline process members of the Methodist Church are accountable to the Church in matters of faith and behaviour. The Church seeks to enable healing and reconciliation to take place through that accountability whenever possible. The Church also responds to the call through Christ for justice, openness and honesty, and to the need for each of us to accept responsibility for our own acts.

As humans our judgment and wisdom is limited, as is our capacity to respond with love in all situations, and therefore we are reliant on the grace of God. By the grace of God those working with the complaints and discipline procedures are equipped with wisdom, compassion and discernment. Yet, the ultimate authority and judgment rests with God, and is found in and through our relationship with God. We trust that the love of God, freely given to all, is at work in, through and beyond our processes and ways of handling complaints and discipline.

¹ For example: Genesis 18:20-33; Psalms 5, 13, 22, 44, 74, 79; Isaiah 40:25-31, 41:21ff; Job 38:1-42:6; 1 Corinthians 6 and 10; and 1 Timothy.

² See, for example, Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 6 or 1 Timothy.