

## Our Calling

### *Questions for the church in 2018*

Dear Friends,

**‘Do you have a growth plan or an end of life plan?’** This was the question posed to each and every church following last year’s Methodist Conference. It arises out of a desire to see the church fulfil its mission and to be faithful stewards of the resources that God has given us. In our Circuit we mirror much of what the wider connexion is facing, with some churches declining in membership and attendance year on year, some maintaining what they have and some seeing areas of growth and potential. Like the wider connexion we have taken some risks and have begun to experiment in new ways of being church that may connect the gospel with those who would never consider engaging with the traditional church. Therefore, as we face the same challenges and opportunities of the wider church so the task of reflection and planning for our future is one which is relevant to all our churches.

I would therefore like to encourage the church councils this spring to begin to consider our mission together in the South West Tyneside Circuit, to ask some of those difficult questions and not to shy away from where the Spirit of God is leading. The Holy Spirit always points us in the direction of Jesus, and our church should therefore be above all else Christ-centred. For some that may mean the main focus is on his incarnation and the challenge to be in the community engaging in risk taking service; for others it may be that we are having to share in his death and be willing to let go of things we have done for many years or even our buildings; for others it may mean welcoming some new practices -sharing in Christ’s resurrection. The thought of an end of life plan or even a growth plan may be unsettling but hopefully as we ask those questions prayerfully, and together, we may be reminded of who we are and importantly whose we are.

In order to kick start the conversation you will find in the pages that follow some questions to explore that I hope will enable you to discuss honestly the life of the church in relation to our calling. I would encourage you to reflect not only on the life of your church, but the mission of God in your area. This may raise questions like - what are the local needs, where is God at work, who should we be working with?

It remains up to the church whether these conversations are best done through your church council, leadership team or in a wider forum, but I hope we can have a conversation and some initial responses from each of the churches at our open Circuit meeting on the 19<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

With every blessing,



Rev. Alan Bradley

## A Meditation:

At our Circuit leadership team away day, Rev. Janet Capstick led a reflection on the parable of the mustard seed, Matthew 13:

*<sup>31</sup> He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. <sup>32</sup> Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.'*

Please take time to read through the parable at least a couple of times.

Notice the detail: it is the tiniest of seeds that is planted in the ground, it is by the grace of God that it grows, and as with all Jesus parables look out for the surprise - a bush large enough to offer hospitality to the birds!

Consider how this parable may relate to your church:

*I wonder what you like best?*

*I wonder where does it need to be planted?*

*I wonder what is the most important thing?*

*I wonder does anyone need to tend to it?*

*I wonder where you are in the story?*

*I wonder how will we know it is healthy?*

*I wonder what is the seed?*

*I wonder what the nests could really be?*

*I wonder who has it been entrusted to?*

*I wonder who are the birds?*

## A Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for the seed of faith and love you have entrusted into our care. For our church that has nurtured our faith and inspired us to worship and serve Christ.

We pray that you will guide us together in responding to your kingdom, that is here among us, within and without us.

Guide us, by your Holy Spirit, as we reflect on how we might grow and make known your kingdom in our community.

Guide us as we ask difficult questions and wonder what we should do differently and what we should stop doing because it is no longer fruitful.

Guide us as we seek to follow the way of Jesus and explore the next steps for our church in partnership with others.

Gracious and loving God, grant us wisdom, courage and love. Amen.



## **LEARNING & CARING**

**The Church exists to help people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care**

- What church activities help us most to deepen our faith in God?
- How effective are our small groups, in linking faith to everyday life?
- How do we learn about the challenges of Christian life today from churches elsewhere in Britain and the wider world?
- Are there peripheral activities we should stop, to make time for our training and learning needs?
- What activities make it easy for others to join us? What links do we have with groups using our premises?
- What do we expect from our pastors? What do we expect from one another by way of support and care? Do we notice or care about those who drift away or leave?

**What are our plans and targets for developing our life together over the next year?**



## **SERVICE**

**The Church exists to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice**

- How do we discover the needs in our community and respond to them?
- Who is involved in service to the community through charities or community groups? Are there opportunities for more of us to become involved? How do we give attention to the moral issues raised by daily work?
- Do we share with one another our concerns about things which do not seem right, or cause trouble in our community, or appear unjust? How do we challenge injustice in other parts of the world?
- Are we making the best use of our premises and our money for service to the community? Are we wasting resources? Are we spending our time and resources in ways which are consistent with our beliefs and values?
- How does the life of our community, and our involvement in it, feature in the prayers of the church?

**What are our plans and targets for improving our community involvement over the next year?**



## **EVANGELISM**

**The Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ**

- How do we develop friendly attitudes towards everyone we meet?
- Do we have a clear message? Are the words we use straightforward and meaningful to those outside the Church?
- What attracts others to the Christian faith? Are there initiatives we could take to present our convictions? Can we do this with Christians of other denominations? Where should the focus be - on church premises, or in the community?
- How can we learn about effective witness from Christians in other cultures?
- What can we do to make our premises more welcoming?
- Should we consider planting a new congregation in this locality?

**What are our plans and targets for making more followers of Jesus Christ over the next year?**



## **WORSHIP**

**The Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love**

- What helps us to centre our worship on God?
- Where and when do we feel the presence of God? How can these experiences enrich services of worship?
- What motivates us to study the Bible?
- What helps us to express awe and wonder, thankfulness and praise, and love towards God? How can we use resources from the worldwide Church?
- What would help our worship to make sense to people who come only occasionally?
- Can we improve the comfort and decor of our surroundings and the welcome for people with disabilities?
- Is our worship much the same all the time? Should we explore styles and traditions of worship from other denominations and other parts of the world?

**What are our plans and targets for improving our worship over the next year?**



- What are our growth and end of life plans for **making more followers of Jesus Christ** over the next year?

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- What are our growth and end of life plans for our **worship** over the next year?

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- What are our growth and end of life plans for our **life together** over the next year?

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- What are our growth and end of life plans for our **community involvement** over the next year?

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## **Appendix 1** Letter from the President, Vice President and Secretary of Conference.

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is just over a month since this year's Methodist Conference met in Birmingham. We gathered to confer in the context of prayer and worship, under the theme, "Day by Day, exploring the rhythm of mission and discipleship." Throughout our debates we sensed an enthusiasm amongst the people called Methodists to discover more of what God is doing and so, as we look towards the beginning of a new connexional year, we would like to take this opportunity to draw to your attention the decisions of the 2017 Conference regarding a Day of Prayer and Fasting and a Growth Plan or End of Life Plan.

The Conference adopted Notice of Motion 2017/209, recognising "the challenges and changes facing every community in these islands and the urgent call of God on the Methodist people to share the love of God in Jesus Christ in word and action." The Conference therefore called on every local church to launch the new Methodist year with a day of prayer and fasting. We are delighted that a number of churches and circuits have already made arrangements to mark the new connexional year with prayer, fasting and other means of paying careful attention to God.

The Conference also adopted Notice of Motion 2017/206, encouraging every Church Council annually to address and answer the question 'do you have a growth plan or an end of life plan?'

The Methodist Council will undertake work on how this might best be implemented; however, in the spirit of both Notices of Motion, we warmly invite you, with your colleagues in your circuit, to ensure that the beginning of the 2017/18 connexional year is marked with opportunities for prayerful reflection and review.

What are the challenges and changes facing your community? What is each church and circuit's plan for responding to the urgent call on the Methodist people to share the love of God in Jesus Christ in word and action? How might we listen more carefully to the promptings of the Spirit, day by day? It is our hope that through careful attention to the activity of God in the world, we might hear and understand more clearly our God-given calling to serve the present age as the people called Methodists.

Yours in Christ,

Jill Baker	Vice-President of the Conference;
Lorraine N Mellor	President of the Conference
Gareth J Powell	Secretary of the Conference



## **Appendix 2** Methodist Recorder letter (published 19.6.14)

In May 2002 I wrote to the Methodist Recorder saying, “if the British Methodist Church continues to decline by an average of 8,762 members each year (as it has done over the last six years) then the British Methodist Church has only 37 years left.” The publication of the latest “Statistics for Mission” (Recorder, June 6) suggests that this prediction is still on target and there will not be a Methodist Church in Britain by 2039 – now just 25 years away.

Of course our decline is unlikely to follow such a simplistic linear fashion. In fact it could come quicker as the current annual 3.7% rate of decline is likely to increase because of the age profile of our membership. Our Church has benefited from the fact that Methodists in Britain are a pretty healthy lot and many of us live long in to old age. However that also means we could be facing more of a cliff edge rather than a steady decline.

My hope then was to both sound a wake-up call but also to enable us to speak honestly and openly about our inevitable death. I concluded that a “Church that preaches that new life follows death should itself trust in God and not be afraid of what is to come”. I believe that to be true as much today as it was then.

Patients who know they are going to die often have a very different outlook on life. They make the most of every precious day. Yes they prepare, and put their affairs in order, but many also compile bucket lists of exciting and challenging things to do whilst they have the strength and energy to do them. They do things they never thought themselves capable of.

So let's not dwell on our pain but instead celebrate each God given day we have left. Let's not worry too much about long detailed plans and being too “methodical”, let's instead experiment, take risks and have fun whilst we do so. Let's share our joy for life with those around us and let's spend the inheritance saved up by the saints who have gone before us, not with a sense of gloom as we mourn our own loss, but with joy and gratitude for the generosity of an ever-present God.

The Statistics for Mission should therefore be a signal that it is time to party. Who knows, rather than visiting us on our death bed, perhaps people in our communities might be interested in coming to find out why we are enjoying ourselves so much.

*Dr. Richard Vautrey*