16th July 2020

Dear Friends in the Cheshire South Circuit,

I write on behalf of the Circuit Leadership Team - the Ministers and Circuit Stewards. Feel free to share this letter more widely.

Perhaps like you, I have been part of many conversations during lockdown about what as Christians we can learn from God during this time. Many of these discussions have been very positive, creative, exciting and joyful, because now is the perfect opportunity to do things differently, to seek God’s way forward, and to let go of many of our bad habits. There is also a recognition that we have some mourning to do, some lamenting what we have loved and what we have lost, and what it is time now to let go of. We have been blessed by God’s creative spirit and many dedicated people who are keeping in touch, and providing worship materials in a variety of ways that seem fresh, relevant, and are working! Many surveys and much evidence from our ministers alone suggests that we are now in touch with more people than we have been for a long time, and new people all over the world are accessing the worship materials we are providing. We have much to be thankful for!

The government has now said that churches may consider re-opening. The Circuit Leadership team and I invite you to have a thorough conversation about what this means, encourage you to consider the following headings in your conversations, and we include some of the ideas we have had as we have thought about these questions too. We also ask you to have the Circuit Vision document to hand to inform your conversation (a copy will be with this letter).

**The Church Council**

The first consideration is that opening and running a church is the responsibility of the Church Council, called in Methodism the local Trustees. They are responsible for the mission, spiritual, and worship life of the church, risk assessment, health and safety issues, special Covid 19 risk assessments, and insurance. This involves measuring the risks carefully, being willing to bear any criminal or legal consequences of opening a church, and making sure no corners are cut that might invalidate insurance cover. This is a heavy responsibility - now more than ever, are you ready and able to bear that responsibility? (It is also to be remembered that, in order to be valid, a Church Council must have seven people who are able and willing to serve as trustees, and form the Church Council under the authority of a chair appointed by the Superintendent, usually the local Minister). Ministers and Circuit officers will be up to date on both government and Methodist guidelines which must be followed. There is a lot to read and prayerfully consider, then a lot of cleaning to do!

**Why/why now?**

Why should the church open again? How will the Church’s Mission be served? Here are some of our ideas:

* The church is communal - we are the body of Christ.
* God became human in Jesus, God is in our midst when we gather together.
* Often our buildings provide community facilities for others.
* Being together is good for mental health.
* Human relationships nurture human beings, we are all God’s creatures.
* a Church building is a tool for mission, a gathering and a sending place, not an end in itself.
* The mission of the church is when we leave the buildings and go, as Jesus did, into the world.

**Why not/why not yet?**

Give good consideration to remaining closed and continuing the mission you have without the responsibility of running an open building. Here are some of our ideas:

* The dangers and risks of spreading Covid19 - maybe to elderly and vulnerable people.
* There are high financial and time costs to cleaning and preparing a building, and cleaning and closing a building every time it is used.
* Many of our congregations, stewards, organists and preachers are in vulnerable categories.
* Church Councils have a deep and profound responsibility when the building is used by community groups as well as by ourselves.

**Biblical stories:**

We are Christians! We are formed by God’s spirit, we follow Jesus, and God’s word comes to us through Bible stories. We have compared our experience of both being in, and starting to come out of lockdown with several Biblical stories. How similar are they to your experience, and can you think of any more?

* After the Exodus the law was revealed and Israel formed by it - a community that had shared the wilderness.
* After the Exile and later prophets, most of what we call the Old Testament was re-edited, the community took the chance to think again about their identity and purpose.
* The year of Jubilee was about re-establishing justice and equality, a reminder that nothing is ‘ours’ but all belongs to God and we are stewards with responsibilities.
* The Wilderness/desert experience - what have we learnt, let go of, clung on to?
* The life of Jesus gives us a pattern to our living - birth, learning, death, resurrection and new life.
* Pentecost - the church is the creation of God’s spirit.

**Opportunities?**

As with those ancient Jews and the early Christians we are living through a time of both crisis and opportunity: an exciting time to refocus with God. Sometimes, like the risen Christ, things are recognisable as continuing what was there before, sometimes there is a newness that is not immediately recognisable:

* Enable new things to happen!
* Give permission for some people to sit down and cease responsibility. Endings are OK and can be good, is this a time to celebrate Mission complete?
* The primary role of the Church is Mission, which includes evangelism: going outwards in the love and power of God and being a part of that transforming activity - what new ways of contact and worship that are challenging and encouraging people have been tried around the circuit that you could also consider? - Powwownow, letters, e-mails, Youtube and Zoom etc are keeping contact with more people. Don’t be frightened of technology, many new forms of communication still work with an ordinary land line phone!
* Listening to the traumatic experiences and pain of others in lockdown can be a form of outreach.
* Using community centres that are already open and cleaned by someone else, instead of bearing full responsibility for our own buildings.
* Rethink church decision making processes - who is involved and who is included?

At the time of writing, there are no immediate plans to publish a Circuit Plan. When each Church has considered the above questions, the Circuit Leadership Team will be in a position to think about what a new circuit plan might look like, and how best to use the resources God has given us to serve the mission opportunities we have identified. Preachers will be contacted for availability and willingness to serve under the present restrictions, and permission is given for those who are vulnerable to stay at home, serve in different ways, or cease to be active preachers at the moment.

One of the joys of being a Methodist is that we do things together, and no one has to (indeed no-one must) make a decision or bear a responsibility alone. The Circuit ministers and stewards would be more than willing to help you think through the above questions as we seek to respond to God’s call together. If you want printed copies of the guidelines please ask!

Let us pray together: *Help us Lord*

*to see what you see,*

*when you look at our circuit:*

*imprint this vision deep within us,*

*where it can take root, grow and deepen,*

*and inspire all we do and how we do it*

*In your name, Amen.*

With every good wish,

Godbless,

*Rob* (Rev Rob Hilton, Superintendent Methodist Minister, Cheshire South Circuit.)