

Dear Friends,

As we celebrate the 'Birthday of the Church' at Pentecost, one phrase from the New Testament stands out starkly at this time. In Acts 2 verse 1 we read, "*All the believers were meeting together in one place*". Over the years I have preached a number of times about the disciples being "*together in one place*". My premise has been that it is possible to be in one place but not to be truly '*together*' and so to grieve the Holy Spirit by our disunity, lack of love or our disrespect for one another. The Holy Spirit will not come under such conditions!

We are now in uncharted waters, an entirely new situation. Can we turn our previous thinking on its head, and *be together*, though not in one place but scattered in our own homes, and joining perhaps by letter, Zoom or phone, as we are able? Is it possible that by supporting one another in prayer, by maintaining our own "Holy Habits" of prayer and Bible reading, we may discover that this is the year for a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we could have imagined? We do have a circuit prayer diary, and we can still use the Methodist Prayer Handbook, this year entitled, '*Responding to the Gospel*'. A key tool in maintaining a sense of community is having a shared prayer life. Another is the invaluable work of our pastoral teams who have continued to keep in touch with their class members. The Methodist Church website and our Circuit website do provide resources to maintain our sense of togetherness as a dispersed community.

Another building block in building a community is a shared Rule of Life. This can be as simple as "*Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can.*" Or our Rule of Life can be elaborated, and the Connexion is doing much work on "The Methodist Way of Life".

As we have recently marked the anniversary of the miracle of Dunkirk, and thought about members of our own families who may have been involved with this, I wonder how the War Generation maintained their ties of "togetherness" whilst physically separated, sometimes for years. What lessons we can learn from them?

I do not for a moment underestimate the challenge facing the church, and indeed every organisation and business in the country, but there is a school of thought that suggests that in every challenge we should ask ourselves, what is

the new opportunity? I am told that since the lockdown there has been a 25% increase in internet searches for prayers. There is a spiritual thirst in our community, and it is our mission to address it by offering the Water of Life.

A subject for a lot of thought and prayer is how to handle the anticipated reopening of Methodist Churches. Again, there is guidance on the Methodist website which will take a lot of studying. We want our churches to promote health and wellbeing and not be the centre of fresh outbreaks of the infection, as has been reported in some other countries. The general thinking is that this is very unlikely to happen before September, given that social distancing will continue and over-70s will still be vulnerable. Just as shops are having to change how they function, so churches will have big adjustments to make. It may be that some local churches are better placed to manage these changes than others, and that reopening may have to be carefully phased according to local situations and national guidance. Please be assured, that the Circuit leadership will want to re-establish worship as soon as it is safe and practical to do so, without putting our congregations at risk. However, we would strongly encourage local churches to “be alert” and act according to the guidance when permission is eventually granted to re-open.

Many hymns have been written about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. I find this hymn, by John Oxenham, especially helpful:

1 'Mid all the traffic of the ways,  
Turmoils without, within,  
Make in my heart a quiet place,  
And come and dwell within;

2 A little shrine of quietness,  
All sacred to thyself,  
Where thou shalt all my soul  
possess,  
And I may find myself;

3 A little shelter from life's stress,  
Where I may lay me prone,  
And bare my soul in loneliness,  
And know as I am known;

4 A little place of mystic grace,  
Of self and sin swept bare,  
Where I may look upon thy face,  
And talk with thee in prayer.

May God bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.