



Weybridge Methodist Church

Newsletter January 2023



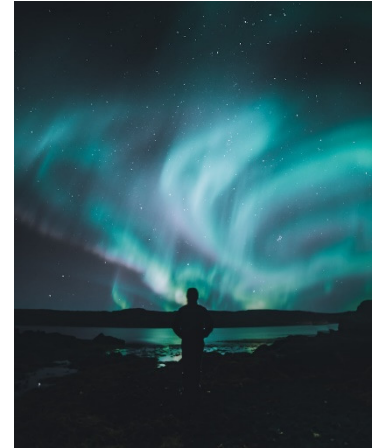
The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

Pastoral Message

'Deep but Dazzling Darkness'

Dear friends,

We are now truly in the depths of winter! As I write this, everything seems to be frozen – the car's windscreen, the water in the can outside our back door, my fingers. And, of course, the darkness that accompanies the short days gives this time of the year its special character, though nothing like that of the folk of Skellefteå in northern Sweden, where one of our daughters-in-law's parents live and where, in January, daylight lasts just a few hours.



You won't need me to tell you that the word '**darkness**' can have a number of different connotations. Darkness has long been used as synonym for sadness, pain, tragedy, and even evil. Some of you may remember that, as children you were 'afraid of the dark'. We call a foolish act 'a leap in the dark', and the period in history following the disintegration of the Roman Empire was referred to as 'the Dark Ages'. By contrast, the explosion of rational scientific enquiry of the 17th Century was called 'The Enlightenment', and 'light' by association, has suggested truth and progress in contrast to darkness, which symbolizes ignorance, despair and so on.

How then, as we begin another year with, I have to say, a great deal of trepidation, given the multiplicity of problems that we as a country are facing, does this affect our view of God? **Is God to be found only in light?** It's true that there are plenty of examples of this to be found in the Bible, e.g. in John's 1st letter, where he proclaims that 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). But unless we delve deeper into the nature of the divine mystery, and explore the subtleties of the imagery we find in Scripture, we may be in danger of appearing to be theologically naïve – and those both within and outside of the Church who look to us to read the signs of the times, as it were, will not thank us! We have to resolve the tension between our picture of God as the source of all light, with the reality of the suffering that we see all around us.

But the reality of God's presence in darkness *is* indeed there in the Bible, even if it's not always obvious. One of the great theologians of the Early

Church, **Gregory of Nyssa**, reflected on Moses' encounters with God. Moses' first crucial meeting was when his attention was caught by the light of a burning bush. However, Gregory reminds us that when Moses ascended the mountain and received the Ten Commandments, he 'drew next to the thick *darkness* where God was.' (Exodus 20:21). For Gregory, this was an image of an emptiness that only God can fill.



Most Christians mark the feast of **Epiphany** on 6th January, when we celebrate the light which came into the world. But the story goes on, after the Magi return to their homes, when we read in Matthew 2:13-18 of the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem and that our Lord himself was a refugee, or a 'displaced person', to use a modern euphemism. We are reminded that God is to be found not only in the context of a light and warm stable, but also in the dark, tragic homes in Bethlehem.

This aspect of Christmas and the New Year, and the way in which we can revisit the twin themes of darkness and light, can help us make some sense of human suffering – perhaps even our own. People today need to hear an authentic gospel – that God is to be found in all human life – in its darkness, too. Towards the end of his Gospel, Matthew tells us that, at the time of the crucifixion, 'darkness came over the whole land' (27:45). And God in Christ was in the midst of that.

A little-known writer from the distant past has helped move my thinking on further in this respect. 400 years ago, the 17th Century poet **Henry Vaughan** reflected upon the story of Nicodemus visiting Jesus by night (John Ch. 3), and in his haunting poem, simply entitled "**The Night**", he asks the reader in the very first verse to see how 'light' and 'dark' can be reinterpreted:

Wise Nicodemus saw such light

As made him know his God by night.

Then the poet goes on to describe the night as, paradoxically, *my soul's calm retreat, which none disturb!* You can find the full text on the internet, but I found the last verse of "The Night" truly remarkable:

There is in God – some say –

*A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that Night! where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!*

Extraordinary words, which I hope will help you too. Yes. God is there in 'dazzling darkness'. That is why he is Immanuel, God-with-us. And that is why this Immanuel is a real hope for a real world. So, may God bless you all throughout 2023.

A prayer of St Augustine: 'You are the light of minds that know you; the life of souls that love you; the strength of wills that serve you. Help us so to know you that we may truly love you; help us to love you that we may fully serve you, because in serving you we find perfect freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.' **Amen.**



Rev Barrie Tabraham

Services for January 2023

08/1 Rev Allan Taylor
15/1 Rev Sydney Samuel Lake, Covenant Service
22/1 Mrs Vivian Gerhold
29/1 Rev David Faulkner

Other dates

14/1 Our regular Coffee morning at Addlestone between 10 – 12
15/1 Accreditation service for Mr David Paterson who is now a fully-fledged local preacher. This will take place at 4.00 pm at Walton Methodist church. It would be helpful if you could confirm attendance for catering purposes.

18/1 Circuit Consultation (see below)

19/1 our turn to help at the Old Folks Club

The circuit stewards need to hold a consultation with our church leadership team and as many other church members as possible (*and for this purpose I will be church not circuit*) about the strategy document which was issued earlier in the autumn (re-included below). This consultation will take place via zoom on Wednesday 18th January at 7.30 pm and we are all urged to attend and contribute.

Time: Jan 18, 2023 07:30 PM London

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/99740633894>

Wey Valley Circuit Structure and Strategy

Report to Circuit Meeting and subsequently to all churches from the Circuit Leadership Team

“Come, build the Church - not heaps of stone in safe, immobile, measured walls, But friends of Jesus, Spirit-blown, and fit to travel where he calls.” (Brian Wren – Singing the Faith 679)

“I believe God's clock keeps perfect time. I believe God may have raised up John Wesley as much for the twenty-first century as for the eighteenth century...I believe that even though what we now call Methodism is in too many ways what Wesley came to get rid of, it need not come to this. Sometimes our solutions lie as much in the past as in the present or the future.' I believe what historians call the 'Methodist Revolution' is an unfinished revolution.” (Leonard Sweet)

Introduction

Over the past few months many of us have necessarily been focusing on the future of the Circuit, specifically in terms of finance and stationing.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the very purpose of a Circuit is for local churches to interconnect for ‘mission, mutual encouragement and help’. It is good as we start this process to be confident of our 'why' as Christians called Methodists. God is consistently working in new and surprising ways. Calling us out of our comfort zones to follow where the Spirit calls. John Wesley - when asked what the purpose of Methodism was replied - 'To reform the nation and the Church' and 'to spread scriptural holiness over the land.' That has been reaffirmed as our

purpose as Methodist people time and again over the years by the Conference.

At the Circuit Vision Day in February 2022, it was agreed that the current structure and consequent administrative burden of the Circuit is becoming unmanageable. At the end of that session a group was formed to look at what changes might reduce the work load and at the same time generate enthusiasm and ambition for growth, and not simply how best to survive. Issues of finance and staffing (both prsebytral and voluntary) are inevitably essential components of this but strengths and opportunities are equally important. We need to look broader and deeper than hitherto to discern a sustainable strategy and structure for the Circuit, and to assist and support the churches in the same objective.

The rest of this paper provides an introduction to the practical issues we face and suggests a route by which we might approach our response to them with prayer and honest conversation.

Finance

Inevitably our churches suffered financially through the pandemic but most have indicated significant recovery over the past year. Throughout this period the Circuit Assessment had been largely met and funding has been made available in response to specific needs, such as support for on-going ministry at St Michaels Sheerwater. Nevertheless, as reported to the Circuit Meeting in July 2022, the Circuit has been operating on a deficit budget basis in recent years (over £60k in the current year) which cannot continue. It should also be borne in mind that deficit budgeting disguises the true cost of operating and is ineffective as a basis for directing resources to where they can be most effective.

Various proposals were tabled in July and it was agreed that the Circuit must set a balanced budget going forward. Recognising that this will have difficult consequences for churches it was also agreed that the Circuit must be pro-active in identifying the opportunities and challenges which our churches face and offer support to resolve their situation - growth, merger or closure all being possibilities.

Alongside the Circuit assessment the single biggest cost item for our churches is running and maintaining their premises. Inevitably churches have and will continue to have 'wish lists' and requirements for maintenance work, in some cases involving significant cost. We need to consider where that money can be found and how we assess 'value for

money' in the context of other ambitions and initiatives. The Circuit has an established process for awarding grants to churches (currently on hold) but has consistently sought to ensure that other than in exceptional circumstances these should be for 'missional' work and specifically not for repairs and maintenance.

Financial expertise is sadly in short supply. Some of our churches have been unable to find a Treasurer amongst their membership and so have had to 'sub-contract' that responsibility. This is plainly not ideal for such an important part of our stewardship

Human resources

The Circuit has been well treated in stationing in recent years. We have managed to maintain a numerical strength of 6 presbyters (now $5\frac{2}{3}$ full-time equivalent) as we had on amalgamation in 2016. Over the same period the membership of the Circuit has reduced from 895 to less than 700. The availability of presbyters in stationing is such that between 150 and 250 members per presbyter should now be assumed. It is inevitable that from September 2023 the Circuit will have one fewer presbyter with the potential of a further reduction in 2024.

The fact that our membership is spread across 13 churches means that the leadership and administrative burden is considerably greater than if concentrated in a few larger churches. As trustees we have a duty of care to our presbyters and need to have regard at all times to the responsibilities and workload placed upon them. How much time and energy is a presbyter able to put into mission and development (services to which they were 'called'), when they have the pressing administrative burden of 3 or 4 churches to oversee?

The preaching plan reflects the availability of both ordained ministers and local preachers. In recent Quarters there has been an increasing need for churches to plan 'Local arrangements'. On the most recent plan (June-August 2022) there were 21 of these, compared with 7 in the equivalent period in 2019.

Whilst many of our churches employ lay staff, the bulk of the work continues to be undertaken by our members on a voluntary basis. It is a trend in society as a whole that younger people seem less inclined than past generations to commit themselves to institutional life and the work of running organisations. Our churches are characterised generally by an older, and ageing, demographic profile which presents its own

constraints. No doubt this is a familiar concern in many of our churches whilst at Circuit level we have been without a Property Secretary and Lay Worker Secretary for some time and urgently need to recruit additional Circuit Stewards.

This is more than an issue about finding people to do the practical tasks associated with running our churches. Over-burdened by the minutiae of church life we are apt to lose the sense of joy that should form an integral part of our life in Christ. Our time and energy is all too easily consumed by 'keeping the show on the road' instead of focusing on experiencing for ourselves and sharing with others the love of God.

Administrative structures

Churches unable to sustain their established *modus operandi* might opt to combine for shared services, establish joint Church Councils, joint Trusts, or seek a full merger. Any of these may suit different situations but are not necessarily straightforward. It may prove difficult to recruit volunteers for joint Councils or Trusts representing more than one church society because of the greater individual workload and the need for involvement in the affairs of churches with which the volunteers do not feel any direct affinity.

If a small church decides to close, or its membership falls below 12, its members should become a Class of a larger church for pastoral care and support, with the larger church adopting the responsibilities of the Managing Trustees of the small church building. However unless any surplus buildings are sold such a merger will result in the overall workload and responsibility being shifted and not necessarily reduced.

The impact on Circuit finances also needs to be considered. If merger or closure results in all the Members transferring to another church within the Circuit the level of contribution by Circuit Assessment might be maintained. In practice however some reduction in membership is inevitable for various reasons. Circuit finances would then suffer unless capital funds released by the sale of property are used to reinforce revenue streams to support remaining churches – an ever-decreasing circle.

The closure of a church may represent the loss of a Methodist witness in that particular place, or may channel it in a different direction, but will set in train a potentially challenging consideration of future arrangements. This need not, and should not, become a discussion about decline but

rather of opportunities for a new but different expression of Christian witness. There may well be ways, perhaps with new partners, to reduce the finance and effort demanded by some of our old buildings and refresh the church's witness in the community.

Conclusion

The Circuit and its predecessors have initiated review processes in the past, asking churches to think about their future, how to develop their mission and identify, what would be needed to help them forward. The capital funds at the Circuit's disposal can then be used in the most effective way to further the work of God, rather than as a means to maintain the status quo, which is effectively a cushion to manage further gentle decline.

The financial and human resource issues facing us mean that the status quo is no longer a sustainable basis for Circuit strategy. At the same time the pandemic has created new opportunities (most obviously through online activities) which encourage us to think and plan in new ways. We have to acknowledge that this may involve giving up cherished things to do with buildings and practices and adopting new relationships and arrangements.

Through prayer and careful discussion we need to seek the will of God for the Circuit and our churches. Accordingly the CLT wishes to facilitate discussions within the leadership of each of our churches to consider openly and honestly the impact and scope of their witness both now and in the future having regard to their geographic and demographic situation and the resources available. We need to identify opportunities whilst honestly recognising the challenges; hope must be tempered with realism. The organisation of Methodism expects us to consider at Circuit level how the strong may be able to assist the weak, but we should not be seduced into assuming that our larger churches are immune from the pressures that others face. On the contrary, the reverse may be true. Frank sharing of our positions may help to allay any fears.

A model for these discussions might be found in the following categorisation of churches (offered by a past President of Conference):

A place of Pastoral Care - a church that has got below critical mass and doesn't want to be made to try anything else new but just wants to be lovingly cared for towards the end of its life. (Therefore receiving loving but limited Circuit resourcing).

A place of Discerning - a church that isn't quite sure where it is heading and needs time, space and help to seek God's guidance. (Receiving a middle level of Circuit support and input as it decides - it might then move into either of the other 2 categories.)

A place of Mission - a church with a clear and discerned way forward that needs help to bring this into being. (Receiving the highest level of Circuit resourcing as the work takes shape and moves forward.)

Finally, this cannot be an exercise in 'kicking the can down the road' for a few more years. Energy, time and finance will not permit that. But with your help we can seek to identify opportunities for 'mission, mutual encouragement and help'. Moreover, we owe it to those who have gone before to secure a spirit-led and viable future for Methodism in Wey Valley.

Recommendation

The Circuit Leadership Team recommends this process be taken forward by the CLT engaging with all Church leadership teams ASAP and in any event before the March Circuit Meeting

Thank You

- To the Smith family for all their work ordering, erecting, decorating and dismantling the Christmas tree.
- to all those who provided cakes for the Addlestone Christmas Fayre
- to all who contributed to the Reverse Advent. Our church provided 58.7kg of food which was very gratefully received
- to all who helped and cooked for the Christmas lunch on 18 December. A good time was had by all. *See photos below.*
- To all who attended worship on Christmas Morning. We were joined by approximately 50 members of 'The Place', who use our premises on a Sunday afternoon. We raised £102 for the Foodbank which was used to help provide emergency shortfalls on Boxing Day.



Tucking into a splendid array of choices.





**All money raised will help
a disabled child in Surrey!**

7th March 2023
12pm for 12:30pm start

LADIES LUNCH & FASHION SHOW

Holiday Inn, Shepperton, KT17 8NP
Tickets **£37** each

In partnership with
John Lewis at Kingston and Rock Choir



Newlife the Charity for Disabled Children - Registered Charity Number: 1170125 in England & Wales.

**For more tickets/info call
01932 243521**