



TENDING, TRAINING, TRUSTING

A DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN

Sept 2016

Tending, Training, Trusting: Towards a Plan for the Future

Mark 6: 30-44, NRSV

The apostles gathered around Jesus and told them everything they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Now many saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived there ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five and two fish."

Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. All ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand."

On Tired and Busy Disciples

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

As our Bible story begins the disciples have just returned from being sent out by Jesus. They have been busy. They are very, very tired. Jesus encourages them to rest and invites them to come away to a quiet and deserted place. You know this feeling all too well. You have been working hard for a very long time. Indeed I wonder if you know just how hard you have been working. Consider the following for a moment.



23 churches in the circuit
1120 church members

1700 services per year approx.
28 active Local Preachers
9 Local Preachers in training

9 Boys' and Girls' Brigades, 265 children and young people
8 Guiding Companies, 452 children and young people
5 Scouting Companies, 335 children and young people
7 Mother and Toddler Groups, 240 children and parents
8 Junior Churches, 50 young people
2 Youth Clubs, 45 young people



Approximately 1400 children and young people come through our premises every week. The majority of the above activities are run by church members. We host a further 5 external pre school organisations and 1 external, Christian run, youth club, adding a further 220 children and young people indirectly served by our presence in the community.



18 Bible Study Groups, 170 people

13 Fellowship Groups, 260 people

8 Craft Groups, 90 people

8 Regular Coffee Mornings/cafes/drop-ins, 200 people

7 Regular Luncheon Clubs, 200 people (over ten months, somewhere between 5-8000 meals)

2 Charity Shops

Across the circuit we estimate that we serve well over 5000 meals and well over 10,000 cups of tea and coffee every year. Not to mention the bacon sandwiches for which we do not keep statistics! We also host three MHA Live at Home schemes catering for around a further 150 elderly people.

Please take time to reflect on these figures.

This is an amazing amount of work. None of the above even begins to speak of the care and time required to maintain the finances and the buildings where this work takes place.

Now reflect again. You have been doing this for a long time. What might these figures look like when multiplied by the last ten years, or twenty, or for many of you, thirty plus years of faithful service. Wow!

You have and are doing amazing work. It is no wonder that some of you are tired. It is not surprising that some of you feel you need to hear the words of Jesus, "Come away... and rest for a while.

The Theology of Abundance

In thinking and preparing as a new circuit and wondering at the plans we should make, I have been influenced by the work and witness of an Old Testament theologian called Walter Brueggemann. In particular, one of his essays which speaks about the way the church is so often shaped by a belief that it does not have enough - a theology of scarcity. Such a theology is particularly tempting during periods of decline. Brueggemann points out that this is a profoundly wrong way to consider our situation. Christians, he argues, must always begin from a theology of abundance rooted in a profound and complete confidence that God is a God of unimaginable grace and resources. Even more that God longs to give us everything that we need and more, pressed down and overflowing. This approach for me is summed up neatly in the feeding of the five thousand. Where tired disciples see only scarcity and barrenness Jesus knows the unfathomable riches of God in which five loaves and two fish are more than enough. Whatever our strategy for the future eventually looks like, I am absolutely convinced that it must begin with the conviction that God is a God of abundance and that we already have and will have in the future more than enough. I mean, just look again at what you are already doing!

The Priority of Compassion for the Crowd

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

This is a difficult and challenging biblical teaching to hear. Yet I think it may be crucial to our understanding and future. Jesus knows how tired the disciples are. Jesus longs to take them to a deserted place for some rest and relaxation. Yet his compassion for the crowd changes his plans because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Ultimately it is what the crowd needs that shapes Jesus' decision. Sheep need a shepherd. We live in a time when there are few good shepherds around and a great many false ones. Our world desperately needs the church and its people to offer leadership, teaching, direction, hope, mercy, love, companionship, forgiveness, and Jesus. As tired as we are and as reasonable as a rest is, we must shape our plans according to the needs of the crowd who need a shepherd. Our future then, is not and can not be about what you or I want, but about what the communities of Leeds South and West need if they are to encounter Jesus and be transformed by grace. I believe that we have more than enough resources but only if we are shaped by the needs of the crowds not by the desires and wants of our own hearts. Our willingness to hear and obey this teaching may be crucial in our future mission.

The Challenge of Jesus

But he answered them, "You give them something to eat."

The disciples are being absolutely reasonable and pragmatic. I know - very unusual for a group of men! They ask Jesus to send the crowd away to get food but Jesus, instead, smiles and challenges them. "You give them something to eat." We can imagine the disciples' faces. Yet this story is preceded by the story of the sending of disciples out on mission. Even Jesus doesn't expect to be able to do this all by himself. He teaches, he trains and then he trusts his disciples, as tired as they are, to get on with it. Traditionally this has always been the Methodist way. We know and have always known that our lay people have exceptional gifts and graces. Yet we have often downplayed and ignored these gifts in more recent times. With the decline in numbers, particularly of ordained presbyteral ministers, the future of the Church lies in recapturing the gifts and graces of our lay people and allowing them to flourish and grow. This is not a call to give lay people carte blanche to plough their own furrow, rather it is a call to the developing and nurturing of a serious and holy call

to renewed lay ministry within our church life in the serious belief that this is what God calls us to be and to do. It is my conviction that this call needs to be the centrepiece of our circuit strategy, hence the working title, Tending, Training, Trusting.

An Organised Miracle

So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

Have you ever wondered what a strange comment this is and where it comes from? Scholars offer different theories. Some argue that it is to remind us of the passage in Numbers where Moses does a similar thing. Jesus then is a reminder of Moses. Others take a more radical line suggesting that this is reflective of military organisation and that here we are offered an image of an alternative legion, a holy, messianic army confronting the powerful Roman empire and the destructive evils of the day with a picnic. I like this image. It reminds us strongly of the context within which we work and worship yet it also reminds us that it is as we gather in small groups to eat together and ponder Jesus' teaching that we find ourselves remade and renewed. Once again this is old Methodist knowledge, the class meeting. Yet it is also one of the principal keys to every thriving church in the world, small groups meeting together for friendship, worship and to learn how to be disciples (not to mention cake!) In fact I would go as far as to say that the health and future of our church depends in no small part on our ability to regenerate our small group networks.

1.0 Our Calling: Worship

1.1 Worship is central to human life and existence. It is in worship that we offer our commitment to God and encounter and experience God's transformative love. Worship is, or should be, fundamentally transformative in nature.

1.2 Worship is fundamental to discipleship which flows out of worship. We love because we are first loved. It is every disciple's responsibility to prioritise, nurture and develop a life shaped by a personal encounter with God's love mediated through worship.

1.3 Worship is fundamental to the corporate life of Christian communities as they seek to be shaped together and grow in grace, virtue and character as the family of God and to offer that love to the wider world in which they live.

1.4 Worship together must not replace personal worship just as personal worship cannot replace corporate worship. Both are essential to the health of the disciple and the church family. One of the particular dangers of the modern church is that as personal worship and small group meetings have declined more pressure and expectation, often unrealistically so, has been placed on corporate worship.

1.5 At the start of the Connexional year 2016-17 the Leeds South and West Methodist Circuit will be responsible for 22 morning and 4 evening services each week. Alongside this there are a variety of regular weekly and fortnightly midweek worship commitments as well as occasional offices such as funerals. Effectively this means approximately 32 service per week, (417 per quarter) not including occasional offices. There are three worship experiments with Messy Church and one with Godly Play ongoing but most regular worship is of a traditional Methodist style.

1.6 Ordained ministers are responsible for approximately 50% of these services with Local Preachers and Worship Leaders providing the remaining 50%. The Circuit is deeply grateful for all the help that it receives in completing and delivering the Circuit Preaching Plan. Continuing investment in identifying calls to preach, resourcing and training preachers through the resource centre and SLO therefore must be a circuit priority particularly as the average age of the preacher increases.

1.7 For Serious Discussion and Consideration

There must be a continuing, imaginative and courageous conversation around service timings to allow the most effective use of our preaching resources and worship resources and to allow continuity of leadership and presence. Continuing to insist that all services must take place at the same time is likely to be at best deeply short sighted.

Target 1 The Circuit will seek to identify 10 further candidates for local preaching over the next 4 years, and 10 worship leaders.

Target 2 Three further Churches will move their morning service time to 9:30 by Sept 2017 with others accommodating this move by moving to 11:00 am.

1.8 The difficulty of providing worship appropriate to all ages continues to be a challenge across the Circuit. A number of study days and training courses have been offered and will continue to be identified. There continues to be significant anxiety amongst Local Preachers with regard to such services. Other than this there does not appear to be a significant appetite for alternative or contemporary patterns of worship at this time. It would appear that many who enjoy contemporary worship find this need met by the Circuit Vision Choir and their programme of activities and Sunday evening practices.

1.9 The Circuit currently maintains four evening worship services for a combined total of around approximately 30 people. (Hunslet, Trinity Bramley, Central/Grove Horsforth and Woodside.) All the worship offered is of a traditional style. Ideally a single service would cater more effectively were services not quite so spread. The Circuit would clearly wish to encourage any who want to worship to do so. However the practicality of tying up four ministers each Sunday evening for so few worshippers has very little to defend it. The Circuit may wish to encourage individual churches to organise their own informal worship on Sunday evening, or to suggest that evening worship be restricted to those forms of worship that offer something not available at other times. The Circuit may further wish to consider encouraging churches to use this time slot for the development of small group study and worship through such courses like Emmaus, Pilgrim or Alpha.

Target 3 The Circuit will reduce current evening worship services to no more than one by August 2017 or sooner.

Target 4 The Circuit will establish a fund of £20k to support the purchase of worship material and technology across the Circuit.

2.0 Learning and Caring

2.1 Our Calling links these two verbs together when it might have chosen to keep them separate. It therefore links pastoral care and growth as a disciple within a relational framework that is key to both. Good healthy relationships are understood to be key to the life of the disciple and the church. It is through our relationships that we care for one another and that we learn who we are and how we are to be as we watch and imitate those who surround and support us.

2.2 The discipline and practice of meeting together in small groups for friendship, worship, and learning how to be a disciple is how Jesus and Paul built the Church and how Wesley built Methodism. It is also noted that this is how every thriving modern church grows and the primary way in which pastoral care is exercised for the church family. Currently around 15% of our members meet in such ways, allowing for overlaps, possibly a little less. Renewing and regenerating our small group life is imperative to building our churches.

Target 5 The Circuit will double (190 to 380 members or roughly 15 new groups of 12) the number of members meeting in small groups for friendship, worship and discipleship training by September 2018.

Target 6 The Circuit will launch at least one Sunday evening based small group programme by Easter 2017.

2.3 The Circuit recognises and celebrates the role of pastoral visitors without whom we would struggle to care for so many of our elderly members. This role increases with importance as our congregations continue to age. At the same time the Circuit reiterates the need for every member to exercise a ministry of pastoral care.

2.4 Alongside the pastoral functions of the ordained minister, the pastoral visitor, the church member and the small group, churches and circuits have sometimes judged it necessary and/or beneficial to appoint either lay or ordained ministers to specific pastoral ministries within the life of the church. This is seen most obviously in the appointment of youth ministry but also increasingly with the appointment of ministers with a brief to care for, and respond to, the discipleship and spiritual needs of those in later life, the so called third age.

2.5 For Serious Discussion and Consideration

The Circuit may wish to give serious discussion as to whether they discern such a need/ opportunity arising within the Circuit at this time. Models for such posts have included full time and part time ordained and lay posts and might be understood as chaplaincy posts to specific sections of our community rather than church or geographically based.

2.6 The Circuit is blessed to have at its disposal the Circuit Resource Centre at Wesley Road and the South Leeds Oasis Project based at Hunslet. Both projects having now become established, need to develop more structured programmes and establish themselves firmly in the wider Methodist and Ecumenical networks across Leeds. Both require ongoing investment.

Target 7 The Circuit will commit to a budget for training and development of not less than 3k pa for a period of five years which will include the Resource Centre, SLO initiatives and other local preacher/worship leader training.

2.7 The Circuit notes that good healthy relationships are key to every aspect of church life. However it is also aware of a number of situations in which the behaviour required for such relationships has fallen well short of that considered appropriate. The Circuit commends the Methodist document "Positive working together" to church members and affirms its complete and utter rejection of bullying, harassment and discrimination as set out in this document. It respectfully reminds both circuit staff and church members of the high standards of behaviour that are expected of Christian people and Methodist members and reaffirms its commitment to the thorough investigation of any such incidents.

3.0 Evangelism and the Making of Disciples

3.1 Evangelism is first and foremost an act of love, or better still, a series of acts of love, a lifestyle of love towards and alongside those whom we care for and about. There can be no evangelism without love. There can be no evangelism outside of loving human relationships.

3.2 Evangelism is secondly an expression of our confidence in the reality of God's grace and mercy and of the power of God in and through the Holy Spirit to touch and change the life of another. There can be no evangelism without God.

3.3 Evangelism is central to the life of the disciple and the church. It is not and cannot be an optional extra for those who are particularly interested or motivated. It is the natural movement and expression of love for our neighbour.

3.4 The opening remarks of this report demonstrate unequivocally the massive amount of love and energy that is expended in serving our communities. They also demonstrate the massive fringe of people young and old who come into our premises, meet our church members, drink our tea and eat our bacon sandwiches. Yet whenever we are asked about evangelism the majority of our church members report feeling uncertain as to how people may be brought to faith. It is certainly true that evangelism in a modern British city is not easy but it is also true that it is not impossible. Some churches buck the trend, why shouldn't we?

Target 8 The Circuit aims to stop declining in membership by October 2017 and to grow by five percent by the October Statistical declarations in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

(Note: for those who think this is challenging,

Present membership is 1120. 5% equals 56 members across 22 churches, once deaths and transfers have been accounted for. 2 1/2 new members per church doesn't sound very challenging does it? Arguably it is nowhere near challenging enough!)

3.5 How? Leading your Church into Growth is a well established and proven scheme that trains lay and ordained leaders how to lead their churches back into growth. It is the principle training scheme approved by Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales. The scheme consists of a small amount of residential training for the leaders and a small series of study days for the church congregation. There are of course no guarantees, however the course can ensure that you have access to all the best and most recent information and training available to try and give your church the best chance of moving towards growth.

Target 9 The Circuit adopts LYCiG as its evangelism training format and identifies five churches to undergo the training in 2017, a further five in 2018 with the possibility of a further five in 2019. The cost is estimated to be around 5k over the first two years.

4.0 Service

4.1 Like evangelism, acts of service are natural expressions of our love for our neighbour. They are inspired and made possible by the love that we receive from God. The opening discussion of this paper demonstrates unequivocally the massive amount of energy offered and expended in serving our neighbours in so many different ways. Unlike evangelism, we seem to have no reservations about service. It should also be noted that these figures only record what we do together and not individual commitments outside of the life of the church.

4.2. It might therefore be argued that no further goals for service are required other than ongoing support. It might however be recognised that most of our acts of service are based on inviting people into our buildings. There is nothing wrong with this but we might also wish to consider carefully that dimension of mission which sends us out into the community.

4.3. The Citizens Organisation is an international organisation which seeks to help communities identify and act on issues of community importance. In Britain the Methodist Church is a partner with this organisation and here in Leeds, Citizens have offices at Oxford Place. In conversation with the head of Citizens in Leeds, an opportunity to offer the Citizens training course across the circuit has been identified and offered to us. The course would seek to train up to forty church members in community organisation over the course of a number of study days. The cost would be approximately 5k. This is a very exciting and helpful opportunity which offers us as churches and as a circuit new ways and skills to help our communities.

Target 10 The Circuit commits to working in partnership with Leeds Citizens, purchasing and providing the training offered by Citizens over the year 2016-17 at a cost of 5k aiming to get between 30-40 of its members through the training over two years.

5.0 Reflections

5.1 One of the key findings of the recent report From Anecdote to Evidence was that churches grew more often when they had deliberately planned to do so. Being clear about what and why we do things is important. On the one hand, it makes life simpler and clearer. On the other hand, it encourages us to ask the difficult questions and ultimately be more honest about what we are achieving or indeed not achieving. A plan makes us accountable.

5.2 The plan offered rests on the simple idea, that having identified our core responsibilities, if we can slowly but surely improve and develop each one our churches will also develop and grow. Some people call this the doctrine of marginal gains made famous by the British Cycling team at the 2012 Olympics. In turn however, this doctrine rests on an even more fundamental assumption. Namely that the fundamental model, the bike or the church, is sound and fit for purpose. If the fundamental model is not sound no amount of tinkering is going to help.

5.3 This then is my first and very major concern about the plan that I have offered to you. It works with where we are and points to where we might like to move. It is not very challenging. It could easily be ignored. My concern is that in truth our fundamental model is simply no longer sound, relevant or workable in our present contexts. This concern may exist on a number of different levels.

5.4 Firstly it might be argued that the basic model is fine but it struggles to function effectively when there are too few people to make it work. How many people are required to make it work is nowhere clearly identified and, of course, may depend on the size of buildings or practical endeavours being undertaken.

5.5 More fundamentally it might be argued that the model itself does not work for a number of reasons. The image or idea of the church as a centre of the community is more and more difficult to sustain in many places and draws us into competition with secular community centres and ecumenical partners. Likewise an attractional model of church which invites people in rather than seeking to go out to where people are risks being seen as a desperate desire to survive or build an empire. Even our notions of geographical identity find themselves challenged as relational networks and patterns of life designed, at least in big cities around cars, subvert older local identities.

5.6 Whilst I remain entirely convinced that there are enough resources to honour our calling I am not sure that there are sufficient simply to go on doing everything as usual in the same old way. I therefore commend the plan as outlined as the best way of proceeding over the next two years. However, I think a more fundamental and wide-reaching conversation regarding our future and our mission needs to be urgently enter into. This conversation should begin no later than Spring 2017.

Summary of Targets

- Target 1** **The Circuit will seek to identify 10 further candidates for local preaching over the next 4 years, and 10 worship leaders.**
- Target 2** **Three further Churches will move their morning service time to 9:30 by Sept 2017 with others accommodating this move by moving to 11:00 am.**
- Target 3** **The Circuit will reduce current evening worship services to no more than one by August 2017 or sooner.**
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- Target 8** **The Circuit aims to stop declining in membership by October 2017 and to grow by five percent by the October Statistical declarations in 2018, 2019 and 2020.**
- Target 9** **The Circuit adopts LYCiG as its evangelism training format and identifies five churches to undergo the training in 2017, a further five in 2018 with the possibility of a further five in 2019. The cost is estimated to be around 5k over the first two years.**
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