

Graham Horsley, Methodist Connexional Fresh Expressions Missioner, looks at the challenges that the church now has to face.

When the going gets tough

This year the Methodist Conference Statistics for Mission report showed that for the first time in almost 200 years, the membership of the Methodist Church dropped below 200000. We desperately need to do something different if we are to have a future.

For many years, Methodists have talked about mission in such a broad way that everyone owns the word. We've been much more nervous of talking about evangelism. Is it time to make our number one priority creating the sort of Christian communities in which men, women and children become disciples of Jesus Christ?

An increasing number of circuits are writing profiles that seek evangelistic and/or pioneering ministers when stationing comes around. Others are writing into every staff members letter of understanding/job description that they are expected to spend time outside church activities engaging with wider society in the hope that evangelistic engagement will take place.

The role of superintendents, district chairs and local church leaders lay and ordained is vitally important in changing culture.

In 'Refounding the Church - dissent for leadership' Gerald Arbuckle paints a powerful picture of the leaders the church needs. He calls them authority dissenters, whose characteristics¹ include the need for a vision, being able to empower people, having personal authenticity and appropriate knowledge and skills, being community-oriented innovators, able to apply the axiom 'the new belongs elsewhere, being reflective, accepting 'not knowing' and the needs for rituals of mourning.

In her presidential address to this year's Methodist Conference, Revd Lorraine Mellor implored Methodists to take radical steps to change the shape of the church through a renewed focus on God-centred worship, generous hospitality and being unafraid of failure in evangelism.

"I know I am part, *at present*, of a declining church, but I am not part of a declining gospel."

"The gospel of Jesus Christ is here to stay, but has the time not come for us to be radical to take some risks in order that we can grow?..."

"Because, you see I don't believe that God is done with us just yet."

Lorraine challenged all circuits and churches to have a vision for growth, in the absence of which was a "palliative pastoral terminal care plan".

I would broaden these two categories of church to four. Do you recognize your own church in one of these?

- *Churches which are strong enough and healthy enough to reproduce new churches*
- *Churches that are already healthy and need to continue to grow*
- *Churches that are currently in decline but can be renewed into growth*
- *Churches that are beyond the point of growth but still meet a vital spiritual need for those who attend; they need a pastoral palliative leadership.*

¹ Refounding the Church - Dissent for Leadership, Gerald Arbuckle published Geoffrey Chapman 1993 pp101-122

I would also add two additional fresh expressions categories:

- *fresh expressions that are capable of growing into self-sustaining Methodist societies in a defined period*

Church planting is back on the map! Sending planting teams to plant into communities with little effective church presence or to revitalise churches which have excellent buildings but not the people power for effective mission is becoming more common. There are many parts of the country where huge new housing developments are being built or are planned.

- *fresh expressions of church that will never be fully independent, but have a symbiotic relationship with the founding church/circuit and leads to a healthy growth in new disciples*

Methodism is naturally more inclined to the small relational, incarnational approach. The fresh expressions movement has helped us to make the connection between serving people and forming disciples in new Christian communities.

This dynamic encourages circuit meetings to see that their mission strategy is bigger than the sum of the mission strategies of the existing churches.

A number of circuits have begun to proactively set aside budgets and paid personnel to work with lay volunteers to do mission outside the existing church buildings and activities. Some people suggest that the tipping point is reached when 20% of budget, paid personnel time and volunteer energy is allocated for this. How well is your circuit doing?

Read the full Presidential Address at www.methodist.org.uk/inaugural-address