

A Pastoral Letter from the Superintendent.

As a Circuit, we have not stopped work in this uncertain time. This has been an unsettling time but also an opportune time for reflection and planning for the future. At a District and Circuit level, leaders anticipate that “church” will be somewhat different because of what has happened. Lots of people are talking about “getting back to normal” after lockdown has finished. I would like to propose that “normal” was not working all that well! So, let us learn and strive to see what God is telling us about the future of the Methodist Church in our Circuit and communities. As a staff, and as a team of Circuit Stewards, we have taken this time to continue to develop a new vision statement for this Circuit. It is not by any means finalised, and input from people within our churches is most welcome, but let me share a few of my thoughts arising from many conversations:

Churches may need to learn new practical procedures and policies they may develop moving forward. This takes into account the protocols churches will need to adopt, in the short-term, for in-person gatherings. This will definitely include communication plans to the church, but it also might include creating contingency plans, including financial resilience, in an effort to remain flexible in the midst of a volatile environment. For the most part, the financial impact hasn't fully been felt in all our churches—and we pray that many won't feel it - but it has in some.

Nonetheless, churches following such a volatile economic environment, may want to reassess their budgets and their reserves policy. Here are four possible axioms that provide a framework for how church leaders and stewards can think about their budgets: Mission is the mandate of the church; people reach people; facilities facilitate ministry (including technology); benevolence is beautiful and pleases God.

Churches will also need to think through their ministry models and who facilitates them. Ministry models include corporate worship, small groups, next generation ministries, and volunteering. At least for the short-term, all of these have been disrupted. Some of our churches have found a new “online” normal, what's the plan for these ministries once you receive the “green light” to begin holding some form of in-person gatherings? Others have no or few members, who are on the internet and we have tried to involve many by other means. In addition; what's the plan for creating more small groups? What's the plan for children and ministry to young people and our older members? Would they be different than what you have been doing for the last five weeks or so? Many of our churches will need to continue thinking through their mission strategy. The Circuit is there to facilitate this. People will still be hurting, grieving, in need, and asking deep questions. Therefore, we may like to think of mission in terms of spheres—spiritual (reconciliation to God), social (reconciliation to others), and cultural (reconciliation to what we do in the world and how we do it). Spiritually, churches can be actively engaged in mission as they: Use online facilities to share in worship; launch virtual small groups for seekers; strategically use sermon series to help people through this crisis delivered in a variety of ways to reach out to as many as possible; conduct ministry to vulnerable people in our communities; seek ways to plant a church; revitalize a plateaued or declining church. Socially, churches can be active in mission as they: Launch group counselling or support groups; assist those in need; care for the vulnerable; become a resource centre; partner with sister churches maybe on an ecumenical level as well? Culturally, churches can be on mission as they: Leverage facilities for missional use; support local businesses and charities; partner with local school systems; bless local government, by finding ways to work with them for the common good and engaging in chaplaincy to councils and engage in chaplaincy in many other spheres of social life.

By now the Church understands the challenges and obstacles we face. However, with every obstacle and challenge, there is solution and an opportunity. As I said in my last pastoral letter there is HOPE; maybe this is the church's moment. Truly, this is our missional moment; where we have the glaring opportunity to shift the posture of some of our churches from monuments and managers, to a missional movement, dispensing and demonstrating gospel hope to a world in need, just as our founders envisaged, in the early days of Methodism.

I am sure many can identify—especially church leaders—with the psalmist's words, "*How long O Lord?*" How long is this going to last? How long do we have to continue doing online church? How long before we get back to "normal" and go to church? I come back to an earlier point, which many of our ministers have identified, the reality that "normal" wasn't working all that well, was it? At some point this lockdown will end and in its passing, there are those who think this crisis will forever change the face of church. The Circuit leadership have been trying to be really positive in looking forward and some of us perceive that there is a need to begin to look at the vision God is placing before us now, for the future of the Church of Jesus Christ, in this place.

Blessings and keep safe.

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