

Senior Circuit Steward's Report – 10th March 2009

I wanted to share some challenges about the Circuit as Senior Steward this year.

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus said, some 2,500 years ago, "The only constant is change". Change is with us everywhere, even we have changed the Circuit Meeting Agenda, these are subtle changes to focus on our vision and values and we are also looking at possible changes to how our Circuit is led through staff, stewards and other lay people and will present our findings in September, but more importantly, it is what we are not responding to in our changing world that concerns and challenges me.

One major change in our Circuit has been membership and there has been a net membership decrease since 1994 of 259 people, all in all, a 27% decrease in membership in 15 years, at a time when the population of the area grew by about 8% and is due to grow by the same percentage in the next 15 years! Church membership per head of population in our Circuit is well below the national average across Methodism, we are an 'at risk' Circuit.

When Jesus walked this earth, he had no doubts about the direction of his ministry. But if he had, would he have dropped 2 Disciples, or would he have continued to grow his ministry in the way his Father commanded?

As a Circuit, we are faced with increases in expenditure over the next few years. One way to react to this is to close a couple of churches and lose a presbyter, thus reducing the expenditure of the Circuit and matching the current income. Another way to react to this is to maintain the number of churches and presbyters and target an increase in membership over the next few years that will outstrip increasing expenditure through sustained increased income. Which is the easiest route – Maintenance Mode, of course, as it is easier to maintain a status quo or reduce outgoings, than it is to tackle the core of our being as Christians and 'make disciples'.

I present two challenges to all our churches in the Circuit that will see growth in our committed worshipping community through mission and discipleship.

The first challenge is a growth target across the Circuit of a 10% increase in worshipping numbers by 2012.

Each church will need to look at what this means for themselves, but how hard is it for every 10 members in each church to meet with one person, to encourage them, nurture them, disciple them and bring them to faith in Jesus, over a period of 3 years and, whilst doing this, to nurture a nature of sacrificial giving, for the place that they now call their Spiritual home. To help us answer the obvious question "How are we going to grow members?" we all need to use the skills and gifts God gives us and the offer from the 4 Action Groups to engage with the local church to assist in youth, worship, property and mission maintenance and development.

The second challenge is that we need to think about our relationships with our ecumenical friends, especially URC & Anglican, within our Circuit boundary. I am not just speaking about our existing LEPs, but friendships and relationships in all of our churches. We need to grow these relationships in a meaningful way, to lose historic suspicion and look forward for our

Circuit, within the boundaries it already has, strengthening the mission to the community we all serve. This will take time, many years, but we need to start now, or face incorporation into a much larger Circuit that may help the financial situation within the District, but will hinder the mission opportunities on our doorstep.

If our Circuit Review means anything to us as churches in the North Herts Circuit, then it is about the Mission of God and discipling His friends, not debating which church should close, which presbyter should not be replaced and how we potentially manage a cumbersome Hertfordshire Circuit.

It is highly appropriate for Christians to be counter-cultural and seek to grow God's kingdom here in North Herts. Approaching our ministry and service in a Mission minded mode, rather than a maintenance minded mode, unlocks a whole range of possibilities and keeps us focussed on our Circuit Policy vision to enable local churches to reach out to their communities with the good news of Christ through inspiring worship, active discipleship and pastoral care. However, more importantly, mission mindedness helps each church to understand and develop its values, those things within which discipleship is offered to those in our communities.

Thank you.

David Latter, Senior Circuit Steward 2008/9