



The Methodist Church

United Stockport Circuit (Manchester and Stockport District)

A Message from the Superintendent Minister

May 14th 2020

Dear Friends,

Greetings to you all as we enter the third month of lockdown. You are all in my thoughts and prayers and I hope that as far as is possible you are able to stay well and hopeful and in touch at this time. I know many of you have suffered loss of one kind or another and I want you to know that you are being held in love and prayer across the Circuit.

As lockdown continues (and I hope that you are all staying alert, if not at home!) churches across the country are beginning to think – and worry – about what church will look like after all this is over. Concerns that many of you may need to continue to be in isolation for many months to come, that congregations may be asked to maintain social distancing, to meet in smaller numbers and not to sing, mean that long standing trends could well be escalated; the demise of the familiar church in the UK, which has been predicted for many years, could be upon us even sooner than we might have imagined.

At the same time however, recent research commissioned by Tear Fund has discovered that a quarter (24%) of UK adults say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown. That is of course way, way higher than normal. For some reason, those not usually interested in church have been drawn in through the domesticity of virtual worship and perhaps, through what they are seeing of how the church is operating. These are people who would never normally have been in church but who are beginning to recognise that perhaps there is something in the gospel of Jesus Christ after all. The church, in a strange way, has become more visible at this time; and the truth that salvation is not just about an individual's relationship with God, but something we bring to one another through deep sharing, listening and the meeting of people's most basic needs is being evidenced every day. People who had hitherto understood the church and the Christian faith to be irrelevant to the culture of the modern world are seeing an engaged and active Christianity. Those who had chosen to place themselves beyond the frame of faith and organised religion because they had understood it to be self-serving and hypocritical are seeing something authentic and more in line with what they assume Christians should be doing – they are seeing a Christianity which is flexible enough to respond in a situation of crisis, which has an informed and prayerful understanding of the social and political context in which we live and move, and which prioritises those things which are at the heart of scripture – love of God, made manifest in love of neighbour, and the proclamation of justice for the most vulnerable (the proverbial widows and orphans). This is a cross carrying, laying down of arms and uplifting of the poor type of Christianity. An utterly evangelical enterprise which changes lives, touches hearts and challenges the status quo. In other words, a Christianity which reveals the Kingdom of God, which was, after all, the ultimate passion of Jesus.

Whether these 'converts' will come to church at the end of all this who knows, but is that the point, if lives and hearts are being changed, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is being recognised in the doing of justice, the loving of mercy, and the humble walking with God? This is good news indeed, both for those long-alienated individuals, and for those who had never thought the Christian faith and church had anything to say to them. It is also good news for the church because it offers a way forward – a vision, a renewed identity and a potential strategy.

We are noticing in society at this time an awakening to the damage which has been caused by valuing wealth accumulation, status and celebrity over and above our service industries and key workers. We are seeing an awakening to the deep inequalities in society, finally revealed in the

statistics behind the Coronavirus and their disproportionate impact upon poor and black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. There is an awakening to the truth that less traffic, less global movement and less production results in clearer skies, fresher air and healthier lungs. There is an awakening of empathy; suddenly that which was 'other' – mass preventable death and trauma, commonplace in other parts of the world – has become a reality on our own doorstep (and incidentally, I totally disagree with our Prime Minister when he says that the Coronavirus is the most vicious threat in his lifetime – austerity and climate change have each contributed to many, many, more deaths over the years). There has been a discovery of the joy to be found within caring for others. No longer is it possible to deny the truth that what is at the heart of humanity is the quality of our relationships, our capacity to show love and kindness and our innate need for good contact and touch. The wider media narrative at present is concerned with whether or not these awakenings can be sustained beyond the immediate crisis. Can they flourish and grow and lead to authentic and long term sustainable change for the better? Similarly for us in the Methodist Church, can we take the whole pandemic situation and the things which it is teaching us in the wider world, and create our own change and critical mission response? In short, can we re-imagine church, just as society is being re-imagined?

There are several places in the gospels where the writers present Jesus reflecting upon the end times. He postulates about various crises and apocalyptic events, but Jesus is very clear that these things are not the end in themselves but things which precede it. The writer of Mark's gospel describes them as being 'birth pains'; in other words, they are a wakeup call to say that something is happening, and that we need to do something very urgently in response. The intention of Jesus' prophetic words is to stimulate change and repentance, in order to bring something new to birth. They are a description of the reality of his day, and of ours, and in the midst of it all our calling to respond is to witness to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of justice which is at the heart of his message. We are called to witness by giving voice to, and acting in the pursuit of, the sort of Kingdom that is very different from the Kingdoms which put their identity in the constant need to rise against one another in a perpetual search for wealth and power. Our Christian gospel compels us to say that once Covid-19 is under control, we cannot as a society, go back to a life of self-interest, in which the poverty, degradation and death inducing systems which are entrenched across much of the world are considered to be beyond our sphere of concern and control. If we hadn't known it before, Covid-19 is showing us the utter connectedness of the human race; if we are to reap the benefits of globalisation then we must also be prepared to place ourselves into the heart of the devastation which it creates and reveals; and once we have placed ourselves there, we must be prepared to look, listen, comment and act. This can be understood as a modern calling to disciple the nations, in which the only good news worth sharing and which makes any sense is the good news of justice, peace and the restoration of God's created order.

How church will look as we emerge from the crisis is not totally clear. Yet there are some great questions we can be beginning to ask ourselves, the answers to which might well be able to guide our thinking.

Firstly, we can ask about the 1 in 4 – those people who don't come to church on a Sunday but who are now peaking over our shoulders on a Sunday afternoon – what are those people seeing and hearing at the moment which is having an impact upon them? **Why has the Christian faith suddenly come alive for them at this point and how might that translate into our future activity?**

Related to this is the question, **“how is the church being missed in these times?”** By this, I don't just mean by church members – I know from the conversations I am having that we are missing all the opportunities to gather, worship, meet and care for one another face to face. And we will do these things again in one way or another, you have my word. I for one cannot wait because to worship God and pray and gather together is fundamental to who we are! Rather I am talking about those who we minister alongside in the wider world - what are THOSE people missing? It might be one of the uniformed organisations or clubs which offers focus to our young

people. It might be a lunch club which offers a meeting place for our elders, it might be a social group for people with learning disabilities, it might be a parent and toddler group, or a theatre group or a foodbank or a drop-in, or a good society hustings. Or something else - all those mission opportunities which in so many ways offer a lifeline. Where the church is being missed by our community – these may well be the places into which we want to focus our collective evangelical energy as the good news of Christ’s compassionate heart is shared. Remember that famous assertion by Archbishop William Temple that the church is the only organisation which is there primarily for the benefit of those who are NOT its’ members!

As we think about the church of the future, we might also want to take seriously the questions, **“what would Jesus do?”**, **“where would Jesus be?”**, **“who would Jesus be alongside”** and **“what would Jesus say?”** These are not trite questions destined for a plastic wristband – they are non-negotiable questions for those who claim to be disciples of Jesus and part of the Methodist movement.

I would love to hear your thoughts on any of these questions! Do drop me an email or a letter if you have answers or reflections you wish to share.

I do not claim to know how things will look for us as the United Stockport Methodist Circuit as and when we emerge from lockdown and into the future. I am guessing we may be a smaller church – in terms of buildings and members and infrastructure. Yet with an inherently evangelical re-imagining we can be a bigger church – in the sense that it will hold the respect (and thereby the engagement, support and involvement) of more people. And I do know that if we do nothing, and just slip back into the way things were before, that the battle to keep the show on the road will be lost. The challenge to re-invent ourselves as the body of Christ is immediate and critical. It is also exciting and not a little bit scary! But I also know that if we are Christ- centred, strategic, passionate, prayerful, caring, truthful and fearless in this endeavour then we will at all times be aware of God’s presence with us. It is still Eastertide and the God who lives and dies and rises again is the God in whom we place our trust.

And please remember as always:

In this time of isolation and separation may we feel the unity of God’s spirit in the bonds of peace and love which connect us to one another.

- 1. When we feel lonely let us know that in Christ we are never alone.**
- 2. When we feel isolated may we be reminded that within the worldwide Body of Christ we are always connected.**
- 3. When we need a hug help us to feel the warmth of God’s embrace**
- 4. When we are compelled to keep our distance, may we be drawn close to each other within the Spirit of Companionship that flows from God and which moves through and between each one of us.**

With love and blessings,

Rev Cathy

NOTICES

Worship

There will be a **live act of worship** every Sunday at 3pm for the United Stockport Circuit led by the ministers and others via the Internet application Zoom. You can join with a video link and see and hear everything and everyone else who is participating, or you can join just with audio, *or you can telephone in*. Log in Details for the next two Sundays, as well as an additional Circuit Prayer service during the 'Thy Kingdom Come' week are as follows.

Sunday Service May 17th 3pm

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83936265458?pwd=MjJpZzE4ME1URXl6cnB6TzEyWEgrUT09>

Meeting ID: 839 3626 5458 Password: 371908

Sunday Service May 24th 3pm

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88663266160?pwd=RGtadm1idWRRS3QwQ1c2Y0tEanAxdz09>

Meeting ID: 886 6326 6160 Password: 960159

Circuit Prayer Meeting Tuesday 26th May 7pm

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88950229287?pwd=NHRMWmR4VklwdFI4OHZkMFd1TnpQdz09>

Meeting ID: 889 5022 9287 Password: 706389

Circuit Prayer

In addition, every **Sunday morning at 11am** – when we would all normally be in worship in church – we are encouraged to pray the following prayer. This way we stay connected in a very really and tangible way.

God of Love and Life,

We pray to you this morning for the life the United Stockport Methodist Circuit, for our sisters and brothers who belong to:

(pausing briefly to reflect after each name)

**Christ Church Methodist /URC Davenport Methodist Church Dialstone Lane Methodist Church
Edgeley Community Church Hazel Grove Methodist Church Heaton Mersey Methodist Church
Heaton Moor United Church St. Johns Methodist Church Tiviot Dale Methodist Church
Trinity Methodist Church Windlehurst Methodist Church**

In this time of isolation and separation may we feel the unity of your spirit in the bonds of peace and love which connect us to one another. We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory. We ask that this time of crisis might pass and that those who suffer might find comfort and strength within the knowledge of your grace, revealed through the kindness and compassion of the people of God. Eternal God, though the self-offering of your Son you have filled our lives with your presence. Help us in our sufferings and trials. Fill us with hope and strengthen us in our weakness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Financial Giving

Please remember to maintain your financial giving to the church as much as you are able. If you already pay by Direct Debit then that will continue as normal. If you use envelopes, please fill them each week and put them to one side to bring to church when we are able to meet again. If you put in cash, please also put this to one side, or keep a note of what you would have given and offer it when you come back to church. If you would like to set up a direct debit at this time please let me, or one of the other ministers know. An remember to Gift Aid if you can. It is really important that we maintain our income as much as possible – we will lose income from our regular users, yet our normal church expenses will continue much as always. So to be assured of our regular congregational giving is very important. Having said that, we recognise that the current situation may well impact some of you financially in a very challenging way and it is not our intention to make life more difficult for you. If your resources need to be diverted at this time, then we also understand that.