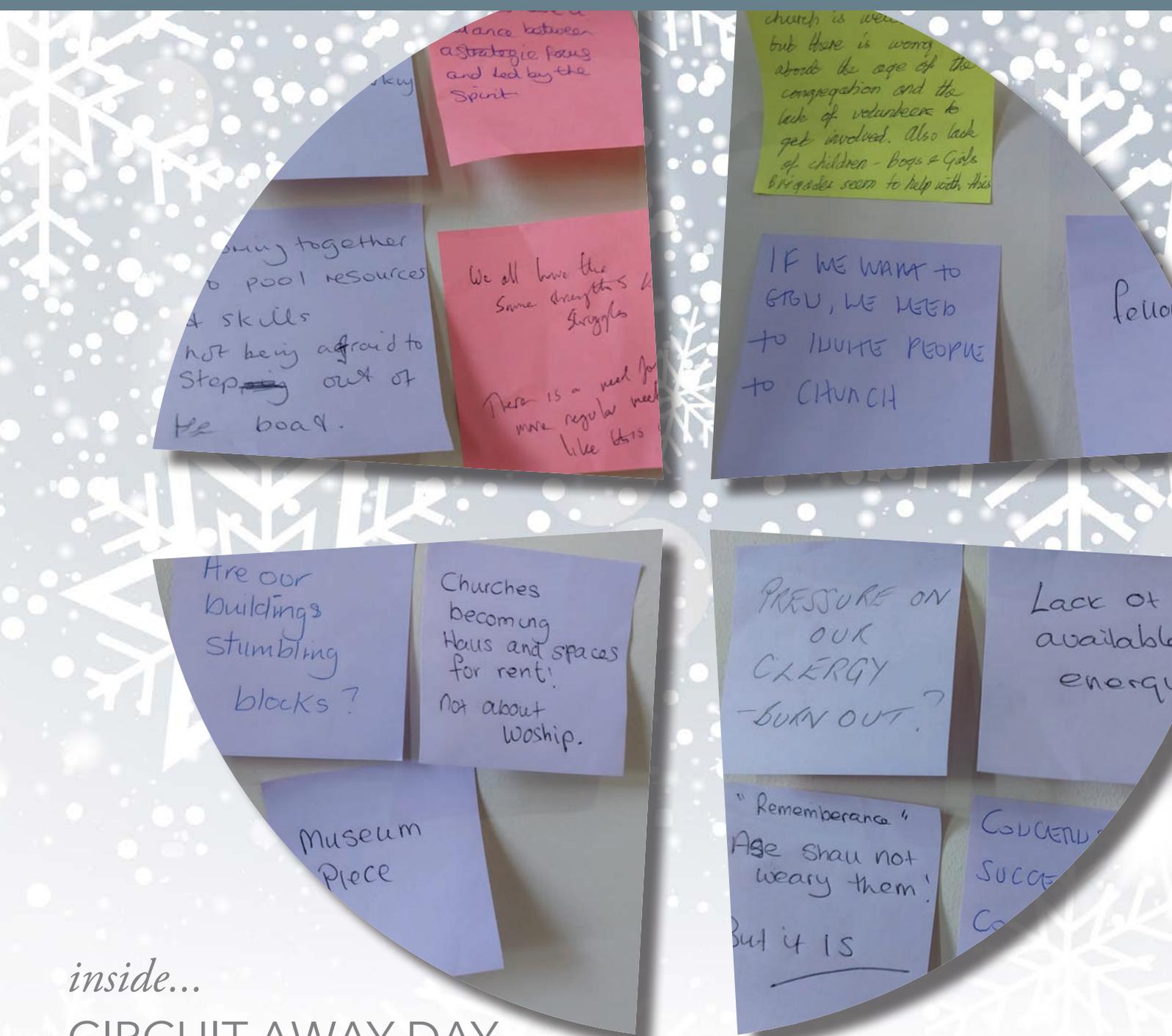




grapevine

CIRCUIT NEWS AND PREACHING PLAN



inside...
CIRCUIT AWAY DAY
ACTIVE LISTENING

Circuit Away Day

SEPTEMBER 2023

On a sunny Saturday in mid-September, some 50 members of the North Kent Methodist Circuit joined together at St Luke's Methodist Church, Rochester, for a Circuit Away Day. This was just two days after many had attended a Circuit Meeting, so their presence underlined the importance of the circuit as a whole getting a better sense of its needs and resources for ministry and mission. Representatives from nearly all our 23 churches were present, along with the circuit ministers and stewards and two outside facilitators, James Devenish from the Connexional Learning Network and Adrian Roux, District Mission Enabler.

The morning session opened with worship led by Adrian Roux, focussing on the parable of the Loaves and Fishes. He challenged us to consider not what we are lacking but what we have to share in building up God's Kingdom.

Throughout the morning, we enjoyed watching the 'two-minute videos' that each church had produced. Some marvelled that the task of 'making videos' would have been considered impossible before the pandemic, but now nearly all our churches were able to do it! It was good to see folks talking thoughtfully and enthusiastically about the work of their local churches. For many, these videos gave a first glimpse of churches in the circuit they had not seen or attended before.

Seeing the presentations vividly reminded us that all our churches share traits with each other: we all see ourselves as 'friendly' and 'welcoming.' Each church places a strong emphasis on its place in its local community, and many showed the considerable efforts they were making to reach out to those in need. At the same time, most were concerned that their congregations are 'aging' with a lack of volunteers and young people.

Addressing the strain on resources

During the morning, we heard brief reports about the current strains on circuit resources. In particular, our ministers currently struggle to each care for several congregations; they often find themselves stretched far too thinly to be able to provide adequately for all their churches. The 'pastoral load' of 150-200 members per minister (still the connexional standard) was workable in the days when churches had larger memberships which meant each church had its 'own' minister. Nowadays, 150-200 members are more often spread across four or five or more churches, with a subsequent increase in administrative functions and worship services to prepare and present. Bonni-Belle reminded us that though some would say a minister having several churches was like a parent having several children, she found it more like having several husbands!

Indeed, the struggle for a minister to cover several small churches is real. With the standard 40-hour work week in mind (though many of our ministers often work extra hours each week), a congregation of 15 or less can realistically only expect one-tenth of a minister's time, which would be about four of those 40 working hours in a week. Considering that preparing for and presenting a single worship service can take more than four hours, there's not much time left for pastoral visitation and church administration.

Sadly, we are not likely to be able to afford more ministers in the near future, nor would more ministers be available as there is a chronic shortage across the Connexion. One strategy to alleviating the strain on ministers would be to join smaller churches together, though this proposal inevitably meets with strong local opposition.

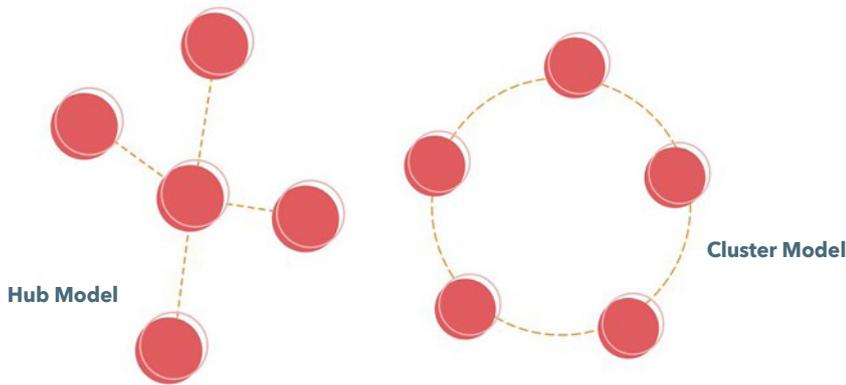
The outside facilitators briefly presented two models of churches combining resources for mission and ministry: (1) 'Hub' models, where several churches contribute to a single church council that oversees various expressions of worship and community outreach appropriate to their local community and (2) 'Cluster' models, where churches in a particular area work together as separate entities that interact frequently with each other. Several of those representing churches at the Away Day also spoke of the links they are developing with local ecumenical partners.

How do we encourage people who attend community groups ~~in the~~ run by the church into church for worship?

IF WE WANT TO GROW, WE NEED TO INVITE PEOPLE TO CHURCH

Need to have a balance between a strategic focus and led by the Spirit

The Hub Church
Using what we have and working on it



There are already at least two 'hubs' in our circuit: the Holy Trinity LEP group of three churches in the Lords Wood/Chatham/Walderslade area came together during the pandemic and have continued to meet on Sundays at each of their three churches in turn. They share a minister and a church council and are showing many signs of growth. The Chinese congregation has a different 'hub' model, with its main worship service meeting on Sunday afternoons at Third Ave MC, Gillingham, with weekly cell groups having monthly worship with communion at Union Street MC in Maidstone and at a restaurant in Chatham. Explorations have begun for establishing a similar group at The Brent in Dartford. Again, this 'hub' has a single (lay) pastor and church council and is seeing significant growth, especially with young families.

During the afternoon session, participants met primarily in 'area groups' to discuss how these possibilities for combining resources might work locally. There was a general agreement that the models suggested might work for others, but very few of our circuit congregations

feel that these models would work well for their local situation. The message received from most churches is that they want to remain as they are. While the circuit leadership recognises that 'local is good,' it also struggles to make circuit resources stretch realistically and adequately.

Worship Preferences

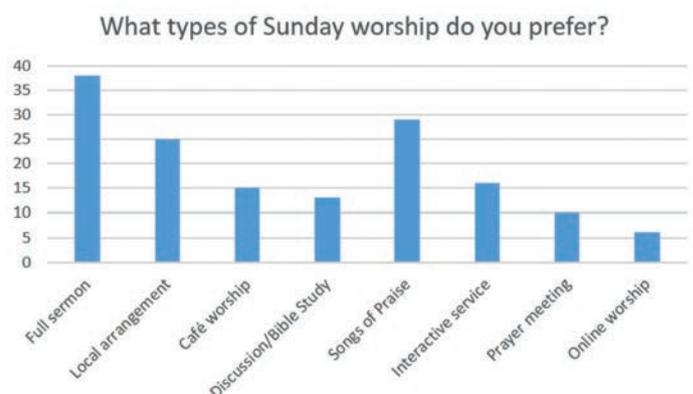
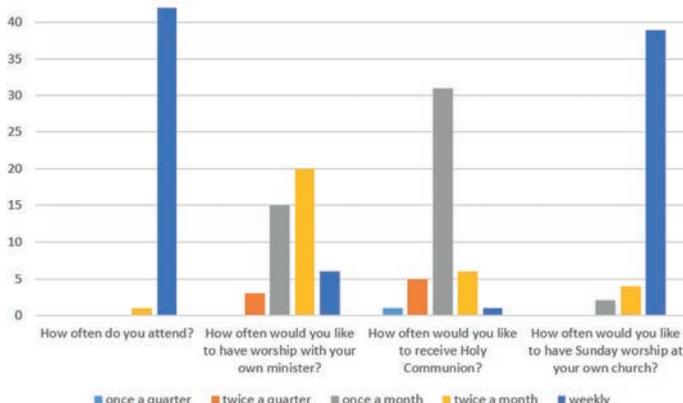
Away Day participants filled out questionnaires designed to better understand the desired patterns of Sunday worship for various congregations. Some of the results were expected, others were surprising. The first question asked how often the respondent personally attended worship, and the answer from those attending the Away Day (on a Saturday after a Circuit Meeting two days earlier) was overwhelmingly 'every week.' One wonders if the rest of the congregation is equally enthusiastic about its attendance!

The second question was about how often people wanted to have their 'own' minister leading worship in their church. The answers there were more varied with the largest number wanting their minister at their church

twice a month, followed closely by at least once a month. Interestingly, the desire to have their 'own' minister with them every week was strongest with those whose church membership fell between 12 and 20 members, with the larger churches more willing to have more diversity in who was filling their pulpit for Sunday worship. This is an area where the desire of some is clearly at odds with the reality of circuit resources.

A similar question asked how often they would like to have communion at their Sunday worship. The clear favourite was at least once a month, with some opting for twice a month. Since Communion in the Methodist Church requires a presbyter (or person with a special dispensation from the Conference) to preside, every active full-time presbyter in our circuit would have to preside at Communion every Sunday of the year to fulfil this desire. Since all but two of our churches meet on Sunday morning, presbyters would have to be at a different church every Sunday, so they would be leading worship at each church once a month, instead of every week.

A question about what type of services people preferred produced more varied results, though 'sermon' services came out on top, followed closely by a Songs of Praise (we Methodists do like our singing!). Local Arrangements were next in popularity, followed by Interactive Services, Café Church, Discussion and Bible Study, Prayer Meeting, and Online Worship. It's interesting to note that 'sermon' services were more popular



with the larger churches and Local Arrangement and Discussion services with the smaller ones.

Circuit Support and Volunteers

Another poll asked which churches those present felt needed the most support from the circuit, with the caveat that no one could vote for their own church! These results were varied indeed, with some of the smallest churches – including Eccles, Hope Street, Dene Holm, Spital Street, and Swanscombe – getting the most votes and several of the middle-to-larger churches – including Tonbridge Road, Larkfield, Union Street, Gravesend, The Brent, and Peninsula – getting a moderate number of votes. This indicates that many feel the smallest churches need the most support from the circuit.

As our ministerial capability for this kind of support becomes severely stretched, attention returns to the role of the laity, some of whom have been faithfully serving for years or decades, but are, like the ministers, approaching burn-out. There were questions about how to attract, train, and equip more volunteers, perhaps with more short-term roles and better succession planning at the local level. This is an area for further exploration.

Buildings and Property

Over recent months, many of our church buildings have had Quinquennial Inspections which indicate significant work needed to make our buildings viable for present and future use. Our prayers continue with those congregations who find themselves facing hard choices concerning their buildings. Some have decided their building has become a stumbling block and are looking at other alternatives for worship and fellowship meetings. 'Letting go' is

often a difficult decision, especially for those whose families have been intimately involved with a particular building over a lengthy period or for whom the church building is the only place of worship in a community. 'Letting go' can feel like a betrayal, like selling the family farm one's ancestors established. Others have recognised a need to use or adapt their building for more community use. The Kingswood Church is an example of a congregation in our circuit which uses a village hall for such purposes.

Mission and Outreach

Though there has been much talk of 'mission' across the Connexion and in circuit meetings over the past few years, the word was hardly mentioned by those attending the Away Day. Instead, many were interested in 'Outreach,' both in terms of evangelism and in terms of involvement with community projects with vulnerable and destitute persons.

In response to the large number of churches who consider themselves 'friendly,' questions arose about whether 'friendliness' was enough to save our churches. Still others wondered if the emphasis on 'saving churches' had become more important than 'winning souls for Christ.' Many were noting that several newcomers had appeared in churches post-pandemic and wondering how best to engage them without scaring them away.

The Chinese Church, which has had substantial numbers of newcomers over the past 12-18 months noted that many of the recent immigrants from Hong Kong were especially eager to volunteer and to find opportunities to practice their English with others: could more of our churches sponsor Language Cafes to help immigrants develop friendships with British people?

Many of the churches that host Food Banks or Community Hubs found themselves with abundant opportunities to engage with folks who might rarely come into a worship service. These 'guests' were eager for the kind of community welcome and support that Methodists can provide. Several instances were mentioned of people who came for help and then stayed on to become part of the worshipping and fellowshiping community, though in many cases, our established patterns for worship and fellowship do not suit those coming in from outside.

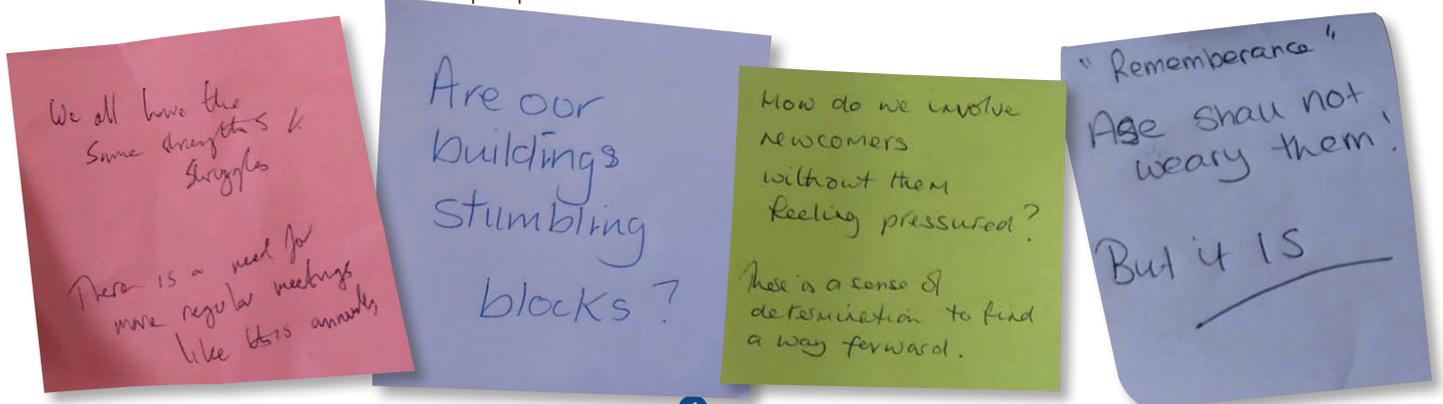
Young people

A specific concern expressed by many was the lack of young people in our congregations.

In many of our churches, there are currently no or few people under retirement age. A few churches still have Brigades and/or youth clubs. Some are involved with outreach to schools, though this has been more difficult to access post-pandemic. Even those who have been able to maintain interaction with children and youth and families have struggled to get them integrated into the worship life of their church. Essentially the question is how we can make the gospel relevant and attractive to younger people – as one person noted, 'it's more than Praise Bands.' Breakfast Church at Larkfield was cited as a vibrant example of how such interaction can happen, and many in the circuit would like to know more about how it works.

Towards the future

Following on from the query about how to make the gospel relevant to younger people, some noted that they yearned for opportunities for their existing congregation to 'go deeper spiritually.' Indeed, 'going deeper

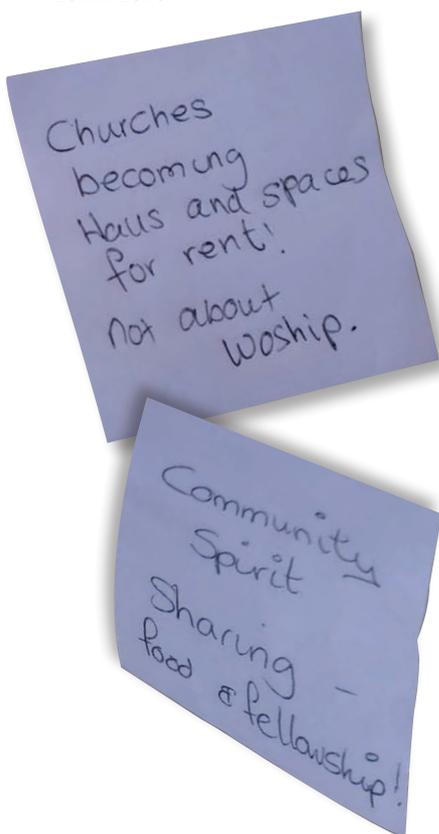


spiritually' is important for us all as we continue to pray and listen hard to where the Spirit is leading us and our churches. Some have commented that the circuit seems to be more interested in 'strategy' than in being Spirit-led. That caution assumes that 'strategy' is not led by God's Spirit, but Methodism has a strong belief in the Spirit speaking through our 'conferring' together. The Circuit Leadership Team gathers regularly to consider where and how the Spirit is leading and surrounds all its meetings with prayer. If you're hearing something different from God, then perhaps you need to offer your time and energy as a Circuit Steward!

Everyone who attended the Away Day seemed to have learned something about the circuit, other churches, or even themselves. Several expressed an interest in meeting again, perhaps annually, for this type of group interaction. There is a growing awareness that none of us is 'alone' in the challenges we face. One of the special blessings of being a large circuit is that we can share with and learn from each other, knowing that God is working with each of us in our individual localities and with all of us together.

God isn't finished with us yet!

Bonni-Belle



The importance of ACTIVE Listening

It is so important to give everyone a safe space to talk. When people are in distress, they often need to feel heard and valued and so it is important that everyone knows how to listen actively. This is an important communication skill that can help in all aspects of life. It's not just about hearing the words someone speaks, but understanding what you have heard. The following points are key to ACTIVE LISTENING.

- Being fully present in the conversation.
- Showing interest by practicing good eye contact.
- Noticing (and using) non-verbal cues.
- Asking open-ended questions to encourage further responses.
- Paraphrasing and reflecting back what has been said.
- Listening to understand rather than to respond.
- Withholding judgment and advice.

You do not need to be a fully-trained counsellor to help someone. You need not have the answers or provide advice. All you need is time, compassion and a safe space where people can talk.

Listening can help to save a life!

Vicki Clarke



'What are you waiting for?'



I always assure our church members old and new that they are very lucky to be members of the Methodist Church, because "We don't just invite anyone to be a member!" In Wesley's day only upstanding members of the community and persons of good character would be invited into membership at the Methodist Church. Today we invite people to 'come as they are' but to be assured that God loves them too much not to allow them to move and grow.

As a member of the Methodist church we are called to:

Worship within the local church, sharing regularly in Holy Communion and through personal prayer;

Learning and caring through Bible study and meeting for fellowship, so that we can grow in faith and support others in their discipleship;

Service by being a good neighbour in the community, challenging injustice and using our resources **to support the Church in its mission in the world;**

Evangelism through working out our faith in our daily lives and sharing Christ with others.

Does this sound like you? Your local church needs you now! There are exciting times ahead as we discern the way forward for our churches. Our church councils require people with vision and a commitment to ensure that all people hear of the love of God. Do you long to have your say, do things differently, stand up and be counted, be a member of the Methodist Church?

On Sunday 1st October at The Brent Methodist Church, we welcomed ten new members and transferred two more from other churches, Why not join them on their journey? Speak to your stewards.

Alex Terrett



Growth and outreach among our Chinese community

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We rejoice in the Lord as Medway Chinese Methodist Church reaches its 25th anniversary, guided by God's grace. This milestone is not only a time for us to reflect upon the blessings bestowed upon our church, but it also serves as a reminder of our mission within the North Kent Methodist Circuit. As Christians, we are united in the knowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ has been with us since his resurrection and ascension. Through the lives of past churches and saints, he has shown his love and righteousness to all nations, peoples, and cultures.

As we celebrate this significant occasion, we also commemorate the 320th anniversary of the birth of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Wesley's legacy serves as an inspiration for us to rekindle our initial fervour and follow in the footsteps of our predecessors, dedicating ourselves to spreading the Gospel in partnership (Philippians 1:5).

In the past two years, we have been witness to remarkable growth in

our community, particularly among Hong Kong migrants. We have been blessed to see individuals embracing the Christian faith and becoming valued members of our church family. To accommodate this growth and provide a nurturing environment for our congregation, we have implemented various initiatives. Welcome courses, English classes, and Chinese classes have been organised to assist newcomers to integrate with the British Chinese community. Additionally, we have established a badminton club, arranged day tours, hosted cultural events, and conducted mental health workshops to promote physical well-being and emotional support. Our commitment is to foster an environment of growth, support, and inclusivity.

Recognising the significance of small group interactions for spiritual growth, we have expanded the number of small groups within our congregation. These groups provide opportunities for members to connect with one another at a deeper level, offering support and encouragement throughout their faith journeys.

In our effort to reach out to the wider community, we are thrilled to announce the establishment of midweek monthly Cantonese and Mandarin services in Maidstone and Chatham. These services are designed to engage individuals in these areas, providing the opportunity to gather, worship and receive the Word of God in their native languages. By extending our outreach beyond the physical boundaries of our congregation, we hope to share the love of Christ with even more people.

As we embark on this new phase of growth and outreach, let us remember the words of Jesus in Luke 10:2, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Together, as faithful servants of the Lord, we are called to share the Good News and serve one another in love.

May the grace and peace of the Lord be with you always.

With love and gratitude,
Oscar Siu



North Kent Circuit

Preaching Plan December 2023 – February 2024

		DECEMBER					JANUARY				FEBRUARY				
		3	10	17	24	31	7	14	21	28	4	11	18	25	
BEARSTED	10.30	WEST	ZACHAR <i>hc</i>	–	TROTT	US @ S'BOURNE	TOLHURST	ZACHAR <i>Cov</i>	LA	LA	NEWELL	ZACHAR <i>hc</i>	SIU	G HARRIS	
BURHAM	10.30	OATES	LA	–	2 OATES	LA	TROTT	LA	OATES <i>Cov</i>	LA	M HARRIS	LA	LA	MYLES	
CHINESE	13.30	E LAU <i>hc</i>	SIU	LA	SIU	A LEE	P LAU	SIU/ PICKARD <i>Cov</i>	SELMES	SIU	PICKARD/ SUI <i>hc</i>	SIU	L P KEY	SIU	
DENE HOLM	11.00	TERRETT	LA	SIU	LA	–	LA	HUDSON- BEDDOWS	LA	TERRETT <i>Cov</i>	US @ GRAVESEND	STUNELL	LA	TERRETT <i>hc</i>	
ECCLES	10.30	LA	TOLHURST <i>hc</i>	OATES	MYLES	LA	OATES <i>Cov</i>	LA	STUNELL	LA	SIU	LA	OATES	LA	
THIRD AVENUE	10.30	SELMES	LA <i>aa Nativity</i>	SELMES <i>hc cs</i>	– <i>Christingle</i>	SELMES <i>us</i>	SELMES <i>Cov</i>	LA	SIU	SELMES	SELMES <i>hc</i>	MYLES	SELMES <i>aa</i>	M HARRIS	
GRAVESEND	11.00	GRAY	BURCH	TERRETT <i>hc</i>	LA	HUDSON- BEDDOWS	TERRETT <i>Cov</i>	S SMITH	ROWE	LA	TERRETT <i>us</i>	LA	DOWNES	GRAY	
HARTLIP	18.30	SELMES <i>hc</i>	SELMES <i>cs</i>	LA	–	US @ THIRD AVE	LA	GERMAN	SELMES <i>Cov</i>	GALLAGHER	GERMAN	SELMES <i>hc</i>	LA	GALLAGHER	
HEXTABLE	10.30	GILL LBS <i>hc</i>	LA <i>Nativity</i>	GILL LBS <i>Carols</i>	LA	DOWNES	MATTHEWS	LA	PICKARD <i>Cov</i>	BURCH	LA	LA	ROWE	MATTHEWS	
HOPE STREET	10.30	COYNE	LEMASONRY	LEMASONRY <i>hc</i>	LEMASONRY	LA	LA	LEMASONRY <i>hc</i>	LA	LA	COYNE	LEMASONRY <i>hc</i>	LA	ZACHAR <i>Cov</i>	
KINGSWOOD	11.00	LA CAFÉ	LA <i>Nativity</i>	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	ANGLICAN	LA CAFÉ	METHODIST WEST	BAPTIST	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	LA CAFÉ	METHODIST TOLHURST	BAPTIST	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	
LARKFIELD	10.00	OATES	LA	PICKARD	LA 23.15 OATES	WEST	WILDING	MYLES	LA	OATES <i>Cov</i>	9 OATES	LA	TROTT	OATES <i>hc</i>	
NEWINGTON	9.30	M SMITH	LA	ZACHAR <i>hc</i>	ZACHAR <i>us</i>	US @ S'BOURNE	M SMITH	LA	ZACHAR <i>Cov</i>	US @ NEWTON	M SMITH	LA	ZACHAR <i>hc</i>	LA	
ST. LUKE'S	10.30	SIU	SELMES <i>hc</i>	–	LA	US @ THIRD AVE	M HARRIS	SELMES <i>Cov</i>	LA	WILDING	TROTT	SELMES <i>hc</i>	WATTON	LA	
HOLY TRINITY	10.00	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	ANGLICAN	ANGLICAN <i>hc</i>	ANGLICAN	
SITTINGBOURNE	10.30	ZACHAR <i>hc</i>	KASONGO	– 3pm <i>cs</i>	LA	ZACHAR US	ZACHAR <i>Cov</i>	KASONGO	ADOFO	LA	ZACHAR <i>hc</i>	KASONGO	CANTA- MAKLOE	M SMITH	
SPITAL STREET	10.30	S SMITH	DOWNES	GRAY	LA GILL LBS	ROBB	LA	BURCH	GRAY	HARFLEET	US @ GRAVESEND	H-BEDDOWS TRIAL SERV.	LA	PICKARD <i>hc</i>	
STOKE	18.30	–	ROBB	–	–	–	ROBB	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	
PENINSULA STROOD	10.30	ROBB	M HARRIS	LA <i>aa cs</i>	SELMES <i>hc</i>	US @ THIRD AVE	LA	LA	SELMES <i>Cov</i>	WATTON	ROBB	WILDING <i>aa</i>	WEST <i>hc</i>	ROBB	
SWANSCOMBE	10.45	TERRETT/ HARFLEET	LA	HUDSON- BEDDOWS	TERRETT	LA	BURCH	GRAY	TERRETT <i>Cov</i>	LA	US @ GRAVESEND	LA	TERRETT <i>hc</i>	LA	
TONBRIDGE RD	10.30	NEWELL	OATES <i>hc</i>	WEST	LA	JT @ US	LA	OATES <i>Cov</i>	LA	WEST	G HARRIS	OATES <i>hc</i>	LA	SHEPHERD	
THE BRENT	10.30	LA <i>Toy Service</i>	TERRETT/ HARFLEET	– HARFLEET <i>cs</i>	LA	GRAY	HARFLEET	TERRETT <i>Cov</i>	DOWNES	LA	US @ GRAVESEND	TERRETT <i>hc</i>	BURCH	HUDSON- BEDDOWS	
UNION STREET	10.30	LA	PICKARD <i>hc</i>	G HARRIS	PICKARD <i>cs</i>	SHEPHERD	NEWELL	PICKARD <i>Cov</i>	G HARRIS	PICKARD	LA	PICKARD <i>hc</i>	US @ WEEK ST.	WILDING	
ONLINE SERVICES	10.30	PICKARD	ZACHAR	THIRD AVE	LE B-SCOTT	SIU	PICKARD	ZACHAR	THIRD AVE	HEXTABLE	PICKARD	HARFLEET	THIRD AVE	HEXTABLE	

NOTE: CHRISTMAS DAY SERVICES HAVE NOT BEEN LISTED AS THEY WILL BE ARRANGED BY THE LOCAL CHURCHES.

aa All-age / *bs* Breakfast Church / *cc* Café Church / *Cov* Covenant Service /
cs Carol Service / *hc* Holy Communion / *us* United Service

For the Spring issue: Please send contributions as a Word document, no longer than 500 words, to bonni-belle.pickard@methodist.org.uk to arrive by 20 December 2023. If you can, please attach a suitable high quality image, but do not embed it in a document.