

3rd July 2020

Dear Friends,

Once again I hope that this letter finds you well in these continued strange times, and while it feels that I write that, or something similar every week, so often in fact that I have to be careful to remind myself that social distancing and lack of face to face meetings are not normal, I am also reminded of a deep longing for human face to face contact, and contact without fear.

So, I really do hope that you are well as we continue to live, care for one another and be church differently. It is a joy to me when I bump (well not literally) into someone unexpectedly and we are able to have a brief chat. That has happened to me a couple of times this week, and it makes such a difference seeing someone face to face. I know that for some of you that has been an ongoing reality, where for others, like me, you can go for days without seeing someone in real life! Yet we press on in the same way, for in truth there is nothing else we can do! Or is there?

In the last week, the Government have released guidelines for opening our buildings; a quick glance at and it is easy to see that it will require a lot of work. I have shared this with our Leadership Teams, and the Circuit Leadership Team will also be looking at it, and we will take steps to see what we can sensibly and safely do, with the continued emphasis that we will still be looking to September at the earliest for any kind of gathering.

I am aware that this brings great hope to some and deep concern to others. We must care for and walk with one another gently through these times. This was a theme picked up by our new President of Conference Rev'd Richard Teal, and our new Vice President of Conference Mrs Carolyn Lawrence in their inaugural speeches at Conference last weekend. It was a conference with a difference, with social distancing on the platform and all delegates joining from their homes, even those received into Full Connexion were not together; we saw them in their studies as they each affirmed their call to ministry; it was strange and moving at the same time!

So, in his speech Richard quoted the theologian Walter Brueggemann (who is one of my favourite writers), pointing to the fact that we are in a very dis-orienting time and that when we come to re-orientate we will not, or should not, be looking to go back to how things were, but to learn lessons from lockdown and Covid-19, because we have slowed down, changed our practices and may well see things differently. Again, we need to walk gently with one another. He spoke of looking through the new lens that this experience has brought us. Richard said:

"...we need to dig much deeper as we look through this different lens. What will be the new normal for the Methodist Church, indeed what will be the new normal for the Christian church? Personally, I really hope it will mean two things:

1. A renewed emphasis on the Faithfulness of God:

One of the great truths which the Old Testament has given to us is of the faithfulness of God, come what may. The Psalmists knew this in the depth of their being. The Psalms express through all the difficulties and trauma of God's people in their history, that God was faithful come what may. The Covenant relationship never wavered on God's side, even though his people broke it many times. He was Faithful! Throughout their history right through to today, that faithfulness has been part of God's nature.

2. *There will be a greater reliance on the Cross, Resurrection, and power of the Holy Spirit:*

John Wesley said, 'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.'

A church which loses its memory about its basic foundation has no future.

Yet we are a resurrection community empowered by the Holy Spirit. Without this message of faith, and the life which Easter gives us we are helpless. We all know from the pages of history that there have been many times when the church seemed to be failing, even dying out, and then the community of faith has sprung back to life, because the Cross and Resurrection are central to who we are; this is the pattern of the church's secret history.

We do not know what the new normal will be for the life of the Church of Christ, but one thing we do know is that it will be transformed, recreated and empowered by the heart of its faith, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ and empowerment of the Holy Spirit."

Richard is calling us to remember that God, not the church building, is our focus and reason for being, and even in lockdown, in essence he is calling us back to our roots!

Likewise, Carolyn brought a challenge, asking us to remember who we are!

"During the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown, churches have been finding new ways of being church and it's been inspiring to see the flexibility and energy as churches have found new ways to engage with their communities, especially those who are isolated and vulnerable. It has also been encouraging to see all the different prayer initiatives and the incredible generosity of God's people as they seek to help those who are struggling, here and overseas. A person from a local church asked my husband, 'What is the church doing in this crisis?' He reminded her that the church is made up of each one of us and that even though we can't meet together physically at the moment, each of us has our part to play in being church to our families, our neighbours and our communities. Now more than ever we remember that the church is not the building but the people – we are the people of God, his family, and no amount of building closures can prevent the church from being who God intended us to be."

I know that we feel the loss of being unable to meet, and that our church buildings have been our normal meeting places, but I also know that we have found different ways, and that we need to take time to pause and ponder what is truly important, and our starting point is our relationship with God through our following of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit! What is the Spirit saying to us today?

This week's Gospel reading comes with a challenge and a comforting invitation. Jesus is talking to the crowd gathered around him following his meeting with some of John the Baptist's disciples who came to him (John was in prison) asking, "Are you really the Messiah, the chosen one?" Jesus tells them to go and tell John what they see.

*The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side. (Matthew 11: 4-6)*

He then goes on to speak to the crowd who are making many demands upon him, wanting to make the Messiah in their own image:

How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, 'We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.' John came fasting and they called him crazy. I came feasting and they called me a lush, a friend of the riffraff. Opinion polls do not count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating."

Maybe we need to ask ourselves how we see God, and then be prepared to take a long, loving look at Jesus, who, having shared his frustration that despite seeing miracles and hearing words of welcome, so many still can't see, and yet he goes on to offer an invitation, come to me...

Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: "Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that's the way you like to work."

Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. "The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matthew 11: 25-30)

I invite you to consider those words and pray about what it might mean for us to live freely and lightly as we look to the future. What might we need to put down and let go if we are to move in the 'unforced rhythms of grace'?

I leave you with a hymn:

*Lord I come to You
Let my heart be changed, renewed
Flowing from the grace
That I have found in You
And Lord I have come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of Your love*

*Hold me close
Let Your love surround me
Bring me near
Draw me to Your side
And as I wait
I will rise up like the eagle
And I will soar with You*

*Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love*

*Lord unveil my eyes
Let me see You face to face
The knowledge of Your love
As You live in me
And Lord renew my mind
As Your will unfolds in my life
In living every day
By the power of Your love*

*And I will soar with You
Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love*

As always, I thank you for all you are doing to love and care for one another, and as always please don't hesitate to be in touch with me.



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