

Thanks for inviting me. Here are some reminders of the conversation that we had and some reflections on that conversation. I hope they might be of help to you in the circuit.

The all-important question: Why?

We began by talking together about why we were at this circuit gathering.

If we ask the question repeatedly, in reponse to every answer we give ourselves, we end up, at least eventually, recognizing that we are involved (with the church) because of God's love in our lives. All we do in church is a response to this love.

Keeping 'Why?' as the question in front of every decision we make could help us to focus on our mission. Ann Morisey says that churches tend to do 'all the right things' but that we've sometimes forgotten why we are doing them. Regularly remembering why we bother is a motivation for our mission.

Or as Steve Wild puts it, "The main thing is to keep the main thing as the main thing!"

Perhaps all our Circuit and Church Council agendas could have the question 'Why?' in front of each agenda item!

Or the other question, about each item of business, could be "How will this help us to reach people with the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ?"

What gets in the way of mission?

I reminded us all that God is a God of growth and of thriving and so if we are not growing (in service, in faith, in numbers) then asking ourselves "Why aren't we growing?" might help us to notice what is getting in the way.

Having agreed that churches are often prevented from growing by fear we talked together a bit about what we might be afraid of. Some of the things we talked about are here...

Fears?

No young people

Not passing on the Gospel

Failure

Needing to change

Lacking knowledge and confidence

Making mistakes

We then agreed that we can take comfort, hope and encouragement from...

Reliance on the Holy Spirit

The strength of God

Prayer

Trust that God will use whatever happens

Suggestions to work with further

I suggested that there might be three ways of approaching mission within the circuit, or that some combination of these might work. (Some will presumably be more relevant for some churches than for others.) My instinct, having 'travelled' the district for a year now is that the key thing is helping each church to work out what is appropriate for its own current life and situation. Then it needs the churches' and circuit's 'leaders' (ordained and lay) to support each one with what it has decided prayerfully.

1. Sabbath... taking a break from the 'normal run of things'

- a) To rest and recuperate where we are tired, weary or sceptical
- b) To discover what is still important to us and why
- c) To recover God's perspective on our life together and our relationships with our communities
- d) To see if there are bits of work that we no longer need to do (however much we would like to keep them going)
- e) To see if there are different things that we actually feel prompted by God to begin

This could be a short sabbatical.... just to worship together for a month, say, with no other activities but perhaps meeting for coffee once at the beginning and once at the end, to catch up and see what had been happening in your thoughts and prayers.

Or it could be a full-blown circuit initiative on the model, say, of 'Giving Up Church For Lent' which some churches have found helpful.

2. Intentional Faith Development... using the contacts we already have with people

- a) to create opportunities to engage with people about the questions that are relevant for their own lives.
- b) to challenge people about faith and meaning in life
- c) to invite people to engage with Christian beliefs
- d) to grow in our own faith as we encourage each other to develop our own faith in response to the conversations we have

The idea is to recognize that people will only see the building as a building if they come to it for activities but have no contact with the Christians there or with our faith. We need to find ways of being sure that we are giving opportunity for growth in faith.

In practice, around the district, churches are helping people come to know God in Jesus and it happens by a variety of ways:

Introduction to others

Invitation to pray

Statements of belief

Engagement with questions

Invitation to events

Conversation

Introduction to the Bible

These are not in any order because things do not happen in any order. People are different and churches and relationships between us all are different. Anybody could 'come in' to this process at any point. But all of these have worked, and are working, in different places.

So I've been thinking that we could ask every church to decide on their own way of ensuring that they engage with everybody coming to the building in each of these ways regularly (though not necessarily all in the same week as that could be overload!). And then also ask every church to think through every church group or activity in turn and work out how this would happen. Obviously this would take longer for some than others! I think though that I have seen these practices making the difference.

3. Refresh our ideas about what church is... developing new ways of expressing all the things that are needed in a Christian life

- a) to grow new forms of Christian community
- b) to think flexibly about how the churches and the circuit are run
- c) to set up a new structure which includes circuit and churches but also 'Christian communities', some old some new maybe, that are equally part of the circuit's life

There is a great new little book called Refresh (taking only about an hour to read) which outlines how we can begin to develop new Christian communities that have a life of their own and begin with new people. I'd be interested to see how a circuit could adopt this approach, but only you could tell if you'd like to work further on this idea with me!

My guess is that the circuit's churches are in different stages from each other and their contexts might make it impossible to choose one of these as a circuit approach to mission. However looking at the three options might help churches to work out which to try for themselves.

I'll really look forward to hearing more about how you're getting on and am very willing to come again and do anything which would help you to make further progress. Let me know! Meanwhile you are all in my prayers, Jill

