

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 response 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 Morisy (Journeying Out: A new approach to Christian mission, 2004) 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. 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.

N.B. Safeguarding: Whichever approach you take, and whatever ideas you follow up please make absolutely sure that you've thought through them with a careful eye to the safeguarding needs. You're welcome to ask me if you need help with any aspect of this and, if needs be, we can consult with the District Safeguarding Group to make sure that what you do is safe for all concerned.

Approach 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.

Instead of doing the 'normal round' of things here are some things to think of trying:

- Go for a walk or an outing to the park and sit/walk, chat and pray there, enjoying God's outdoors
- Go to see whatever other people locally do on a Sunday (and join in if you can in all conscience!): car boot sales, allotments, garden centres, shopping centres, whatever it is that people do, and then gather there (coffee shop?) to talk about what you've seen and to work out what to pray about it
- Go for a prayer walk around your community, and stop and pray in all the 'significant' places for the health of your community and for yourselves as you work out how to respond to what you see

(For any of the above you could organize an 'at home' prayer meeting for those who are not able to be this active, to pray for those who are, as they are out and about)

- Go together to worship in other churches around the area and notice what you miss and what you value. Take them greetings from the Methodist church/circuit and tell them about what you're doing.
- Get together to improve your area somehow making it more like 'your kin-dom come on earth as it is in heaven' (in however small a way)
- Gather in a pub or a coffee shop and ask people to fill in a little card saying what concerns them most about 'life in general' (or their own lives in particular if they offer this). Explain that you're from the local church but you're trying to work out what it is that matters most to people. Maybe invite them to join you, there and then, or the following week to have a conversation about it and to explain more to you
- Invite a group of people who do not usually attend your church (another faith group, or a different age group perhaps) to talk with you (offer to visit where they feel 'at home') to tell you about their concerns and to think with you about what is important to them.
- Choose a local campaign or charity, spend time finding out about their work and joining in (however you can) with this part of 'God's kin-dom' in your area
- Hold a 'My favourite things' event where local people are invited to come in and have their photo taken with their favourite thing and talk with them about why it is special, then make an exhibition and invite the local community, family and friends.
- Go for a meal, or cook one, with each person bringing a friend from another part of their lives and just enjoy listening to each other and try to hear what God might be saying through the conversations
- Use your 'extra' time to visit neighbours or spend time with friends and family, asking them about their lives and asking whether they feel they have any ideas about how faith might relate to them or people like them
- Go to a film together and talk about it over a drink, popcorn, icecream, or a meal
- Organize four sessions (Sundays or otherwise) based on 'Our calling' but not doing things the way you normally do...

Worship... one Sunday could be worship at another church

Learning and Caring... one could be a Bible study or learning from each other about your normal lives (working or otherwise) and talking together about how faith effects the week. Try to do this somewhere beyond the church walls to connect with your local context.

Service... one could be a 'community service' activity... litter-picking, planting bulbs (guerrilla gardening!), organizing a community skip, offering to clear somebody's

garden or paint somebody's railings (Social services might know who needs that kind of help)

Evangelism... one Sunday could be offering to pray for people in the streets, holding a stall outside the church (using cards I have perhaps), or if it's needed more at this stage have some training about evangelism to get you started.

Some important things:

- a) Keep in touch during the sabbatical... with God and each other, to check out what you're noticing and learning... this is an intentional sabbatical not just a chance to 'miss church'!
- b) Be aware of people's financial possibilities and don't plan things that exclude people, though some kind of 'pooling' of costs and resources might be possible
- c) Do what suits your church. None of the above might work for you but something else might.
- d) Get together at the end and share what you have noticed and learned, then work out your 'next steps'. What is God asking you to go back to and value? What new things might God be leading you to try? How can you make new connections for the sake of the Gospel?
- e) Do, please, let the district MANGO know what works for you and I can add to this list for other people.

Approach 2. Intentional Faith Development... using your existing contacts

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

d) to challenge people about faith and meaning in life

This approach is for churches which have community group activities on the premises, to move from being a 'land-lord' to a missional community involving others in developing faith together.

The idea is to recognize that people will only see the building as a building if they come to it for activities unless they have contact with the Christians there or with our faith. Having community premises means that we have opportunity to be intentional in the practices which encourage growth in faith.

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

Introduction to others

Invitation to pray

Statements of belief

Engagement with questions

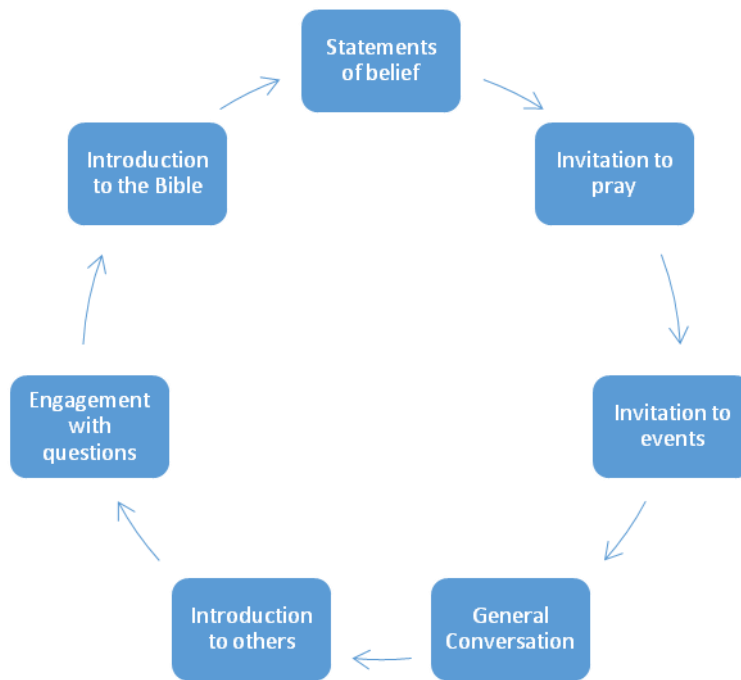
Invitation to events

General conversation

Introduction to the Bible

These are not in any order because people do not come to faith by these happening in any particular 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 why not 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 churches than others! I have seen these regular practices making the difference.



Here are some ideas for each of these practices which invite people to develop faith. Some of these I'm sure you will be doing already. No doubt you will also be able to think of your own ways of doing these things... and the District MANGO would love to hear about them!

Introduction to others

- Church members agree to be on the premises for a particular group and are just 'around' as a friendly face until they become known (N.B. safer recruitment according to our safeguarding policies will be important here)
- Ask members of local community groups if they'd be willing to walk round the building with you and tell you how it, and therefore your church, 'comes across'... this is a good way of valuing other opinions and getting to know people by name
- Have a week now and again when somebody from the church is there at every event/activity to give something out (suggestions below)
- Ask people to pray for and make friends with anybody on their road, including therefore, any who come to church

- Invite people from the community groups to be on a stall at fund-raising events with a church member so that everybody is paired up
- Hold a barbeque, or coffee morning, or pancake party outside your building so that people will stop and chat and make a connection they will remember
- Do some fund-raising for a local charity and invite your community group members to join in or to plan it with you... they will probably be glad to use your space

Invitation to pray

- A prayer board or book
- A prayer box
- A prayer 'post' box on the outside of the church building
- A prayer event with prayer request slips given to each person
- A 'prayer on the streets' time outside the building
- A poster saying how to ask for prayer
- A space with easy access from the 'community spaces' which can be used for people to think, pray or just to sit quietly
- Ask people if they'd like prayers (of thanksgiving or intercession) to go into the 'notice-sheet' or in the worship prayers on Sunday or midweek or whenever
- A leaflet explaining that we believe prayer makes a difference... given to each person using the building from time to time... and telling them how to ask for your prayers, and with suggestions about how to pray themselves
- Text-a-prayer scheme
- Space on the church website to explain prayer and to offer suggested prayers, and to explain how to ask for prayer
- Prayer booklets, or cards, for people to pick up
- A Christmas tree with decorations for people to write and add their own prayers (at Christmas obviously!!) or a Spring, Summer or Autumn tree would work just as well
- Various 'artistic' expressions of prayer: see Art at the Chapel if you are on Facebook: website <https://www.facebook.com/artatthechapelleicester/photos> for some examples or contact Ruth Joy, the art worker there for more ideas
- A prayer labyrinth or prayer walk outside your church or around your area. You could ask if community group members would like to join in or for you to call at their business, school, or wherever.

Statements of belief

- Posters with statements on them, inside and/or outside the building
- A poster or board in each community room saying what the Methodist Church stands for
- Seasonal posters with explanation of the gist of the Christian festival
- Leaflet to say what your church 'stands for' and believes, either to be given out from time-to-time or to be picked up, or both... somewhere easily accessible, on the way out of the door perhaps
- Photo displays of the members/attenders saying what they stand for (for example
<https://artatthechapel.com/weaving-womens-wisdom/what-church-means-to-me>)
- Give out something free (a wrapped chocolate at Christmas, an Easter egg at Easter, a flower for All Saints Day, wet wipes for Ash Weds, or whatever random ideas strike you) to everybody who enters the building.... to make a clear statement about our belief in the grace of God as a free offer
- Statements from the Methodist Church in Britain website ... on walls, in leaflets, or on your own website... at times of 'crisis' or particular event in the world/UK
- Give everybody who uses your building a mug (or other free gift) saying what your church believes.

Engagement with questions (don't be afraid to be honest if your answer is 'We don't know')

- Have a question box and a board where you will put up the questions (anonymously) with various Christians' answers.... Could be researched from 'famous' Christians, or be more local people's answers, or a mixture of both.
- Have an event where somebody texts you a question with a request for a free pizza, and you deliver the pizza with your own answer, or that of 'famous' Christians... it could be fun researching these!
- Hold events where people can come and ask whatever they want... have a church member, a local 'celebrity', a local councillor, maybe the minister as well, on a panel. Invite leaders of other denominations or faiths to join in.
- Have an inter-faith event where you do a 'speed-dating' approach to asking questions (ask me if that doesn't make sense)
- Hold regular film evenings with time to eat and talk after the film
- Alpha and Emmaus type courses

- Table Talk activities (can be incorporated into normal 'coffee mornings') where you put questions, or newspaper articles, around on the table and just wait for people to pick them up and start to talk about them. (Ready-made packs are available from The Ugly Duckling company, but you can easily make your own).
- 'Go on... Ask me' people at fund-raising events and fairs
- Order and use the new resource 'Ruth's cards' in any number of ways (advertised on the website soon)

Invitation to events

- Posters
- Named invitations where the group is a church group or the organization have permission to pass on names (they could be asked to ask for this as part of their use of the building perhaps?)
- Facebook friendships and Church FB page
- 'Link' person for each group (if you've chosen to do that above) could give out invitations to people who, by now, they will know
- Include some entirely sociable but distinctly fun events of the kind that people would like to go to anyway... try an open mic event, or karaoke, or a board games evening, bowling, or a meal out
- Be 'up front' about invitations to church worship or faith development events... this is who you are!

General Conversation

- Just have a go at listening and talking more
- Plan some deliberately inter-generational events to make cross-generational conversation possible

Not much more to say about this. We tend to be good at it... and it's the basis for all our other conversations... but it does need to go along with some of these intentional faith development practices for us to share our faith with others.

Introduction to the Bible

- Have a box with Bible texts for people to take away... one church found that they were having to re-fill theirs every week because people were helping themselves through the week!

- Have a good stock of Bibles in an obvious place, in a variety of translations, that people are invited to take away for themselves
- Hold ‘What does the Bible say about....?’ events (church members will probably be interested too). You could invite people who use the building to suggest topics
- Take photos of your members/attenders holding a card on which they’ve written ‘For me the Bible is...’ or ‘My favourite Bible verse is...’ and display them somewhere most-seen and on your website
- Use an old fashioned ‘promise box’ to offer people and then talk with them about what they’ve picked
- Encourage church members to practice saying “That reminds me of the Bible story about...”
- Invite people to courses on the Bible and to your Bible study groups or one-off sessions (lots of younger people might come to a one-off but not join a regular group)
- Organise a children’s Bible story telling session for families to join in with, or organize one for local residential homes to come to. Again one-offs are possibly better than regular events (Open the Book could perhaps be used)
https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/get-involved/open-the-book/?source_code=99012_openthebook.net
- Give every child who comes to your activities a Bible story book with the permission of the group leader... maybe as a Christmas gift from the church (perhaps you could ask every adult member to consider buying one as an extra gift for the ‘church family’ to give to the wider church community ‘family’)

Approach 3: Re-think 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!

Begin to think of the circuit as a group of Christian communities, some of which meet in church buildings but all of which are missional communities with their own way of reaching out to others and growing in faith, service and numbers.

Lastly, I'm sorry this wasn't ready for your CLT but thanks for giving me the opportunity to think it all through. Any feedback you can give would be great!

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'm more than happy to be in touch about any of this that doesn't make sense or to help with thinking through what any of the ideas might mean for your churches, in any of the three approaches.

These ideas are nowhere near exhaustive of course... they've just come out of my first year, so I'd be happy to hear of anything we can add for other circuits to benefit from.

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