



Our Calling – ‘Every Church Growing’: The Darlington District Plan

This is what we are about.

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We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

(The Romero Prayer)

1. Introduction

The Methodist Conference in 2017, following reflection upon significant, long term decline in membership, reaffirmed *Our Calling* as its key strategic priority. The Darlington District seeks to develop its mission strategy in the light of the Connexional reaffirmation of *Our Calling*. In particular, the district is committed to a 10 year focus beginning in September 2019 entitled, ‘Every church growing’. Our aim is to reverse the trends of decline and develop the foundations for long term growth even if numbers continue to decline in the short to medium term. We know that this is a challenging target and there is a realistic recognition that growth will require pain and pruning and that many congregations feel tired, discouraged and overloaded. Yet we are a people of hope. We affirm the conviction of Jim Wallis that, ‘Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then making the evidence change.’

We believe that change in our context requires a consistent, long term approach committed to the nurture of a Christ centred, Spirit filled, outward looking, hopeful and confident culture open to risk for the sake of the Gospel. The guiding principle within the District Plan is to focus upon *Our Calling* as a template for considering vision, short and long term mission objectives and the recalibration of district structures to make them simpler, adaptable, more flexible, and targeted upon the mission and ministry needs of local churches and circuits. We aim to focus on holistic growth in worship, learning, service and evangelism as local churches, circuits and the district seek to live out our discipleship in worship and mission and respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ.

2. Context and Challenges

Context

The Darlington District stretches from the northern part of North Yorkshire to the middle of County Durham, bounded to the east by the North Sea and reaching into the Pennines in the west.

It contains rural areas in the Dales and part of the North Yorkshire Moors, the ex-mining towns and villages of the former Durham Coalfield, and industrial and post-industrial areas especially but not exclusively around the River Tees. Within this area lie manufacturing and service industries, agriculture, education, tourism, unemployment and underemployment and some significant examples of regeneration. The District contains Catterick Garrison, a major garrison and military town, south of Richmond. The District contains both large areas of social housing and isolated farming communities with challenges of both obvious and hidden poverty.

The District has a considerable Methodist heritage: it was regularly visited by John Wesley and in the nineteenth century was a strong area for Primitive Methodism. This heritage and the historical development of Methodism in agricultural, mining and industrial communities has, in many instances, had a strong influence upon the geographical location of chapels and impacted the particular shape of growth and subsequent decline experienced by Methodism in the district as populations have shifted and traditional forms of agriculture, industry and employment have declined. The symbolic role of Methodism remains important in some communities, where Methodist Churches are favoured for rites of passage far beyond their membership.

Within the District lie six prisons (three clustered in the Durham area), the Universities of Teesside and Durham, various colleges of higher/further education and three Methodist primary schools. There are also several major hospitals. The Anglican training college, Cranmer Hall, is part of St John’s College, Durham, and includes within it the Wesley Study Centre. The wider District is not particularly ethnically diverse , however there is a diverse ethnic population established in Teesside with long established work with asylum seekers, two Chinese congregations (Middlesbrough and Durham) and significant numbers of overseas students studying in educational establishments in the district. There is a Fijian Fellowship located at Catterick Garrison.

Ecumenically, the district overlaps with three Anglican dioceses (Durham, York, Leeds), the Roman Catholic Diocese of Middlesbrough, the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church and the Northern Baptist Association.

Challenges: Health and viability

- Whilst the District has a considerable Methodist heritage and there are several pockets of energy, talent and growth, membership has been in decline for several decades and the age profile of our congregations continues to grow older. The key challenge facing local churches, circuits and the district is to reverse the decline in membership by growing new disciples. The Statistics for Mission Profile indicates the recent rates of decline in membership in the district indicative of a trend which goes back much further:

Year	Membership
2013	5809
2016	5105
2018	4770

The last collected data set (October 2018), revealed the following profile:

Recorded Gains and Losses					
New	Other Gains	Transfers	Transfers	Other Losses	Deaths
		In	Out		
56	7	72	80	136	183

- The decline in membership is mirrored in the decline in numbers attending worship and in other forms of affiliation, including community engagement. This trend is exacerbated by, in general terms, an ageing profile within our congregations.
- Discipleship – a key challenge relates to the nurture of discipleship and small groups which are generally seen as core to holistic church growth. The renewal of discipleship formation and identity is, therefore, key to the renewal of local churches, circuits and the district.
- Ministry – in recent years, and perhaps particularly since the end of ordination training at the Wesley Study Centre, it has been difficult to attract presbyters and deacons to the district. This feature is made even more complex by the decline in ordained vocations more generally within the Methodist Church and the difficulties of financing ministry, especially in areas of deprivation. The decline in numbers of presbyters and deacons in the district has been mirrored by the decline in numbers of active Local Preachers although there have been significant developments in the growth of numbers of Worship Leaders and lay employees engaged in pastoral or mission focused roles. One concrete impact of decline in ministries is an increase in own arrangements services in circuits.
- History and culture - there are particular challenges for Methodism in the district which historically has had a strong connection with particular socio-economic groups which have declined with the loss of intensive agriculture and heavy industry. In particular, the geographical spread and culture of chapel life has been significantly influenced by our past social history. This past is both something to be celebrated and honoured and presents a challenge within a socio-economic context and population distribution which is now radically different. Set against this general observation is the continuing symbolic importance of Methodism in a number of communities typified especially in rites of passage.
- Governance - more broadly declines in membership are reflected in declining numbers of volunteers, including for roles which have traditionally been seen as essential to the maintenance of church life, and pressure upon finances. In addition, roles have become more complex as the external environment (e.g. charity law, accounting procedures, GDPR, Safeguarding) within which Church governance functions requires a greater level of professional competence on the part of office holders.
- The district is asset rich in terms of its buildings although there are huge variations in the value of assets across the district. We have many good quality buildings but also several instances of buildings which are under resourced and under-utilised or which could be better used to provide a better and more stable income base to support ministry.

3. Core Aspirations and Ways of Working

Aspirations

We recognise that the Methodist Church in the Darlington District will look different in 10 years' time from how it looks now. As we begin to sow seeds and build foundations for the future, we aspire to create a culture at every level of district, circuit and local church life which:

- is Christ centred and Spirit filled
- is hopeful, welcoming, inclusive and hospitable regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or sexuality
- is intentionally participative and inter-generational in focus and development
- is willing to take holy risks, is not afraid of failure, and seeks to build the foundations and plant the seeds that one day will grow
- experiments with different forms of Christian community and plants new churches for new people
- supports circuits and local churches as they ask themselves how they are living out their calling, helping churches to assess their health and viability for the future
- seeks to develop intentional discipleship through worship, sacrament, prayer, and scripture, and acts of witness and service
- celebrates learning, small groups and opportunities for fellowship as building blocks for growth
- seeks the transformation of individuals, communities and wider public life through testimony, story and acts of public service and witness
- seeks to work in partnership with people of peace ecumenically, in our communities and across the wider life of the region
- develops structures which, whilst ensuring good governance, are fit for missional purpose

Positive Working Together

The Methodist Church is an inclusive Church that seeks to work collaboratively and recognises the challenges that difference can bring.

We commit to:

- listen carefully to each other
- speak and act respectfully at all times
- be courteous in all communications
- encourage confidence and openness in our relationships
- never use verbal or physical intimidation in our relationships
- deal positively with one another even when we disagree

4. Key Themes: Finding Focus

The following themes have been identified as key in the first phase of development of the 'every church growing' strategy:

- Our Calling Review – before the end of 2021 each circuit, working with local churches and supported by the district, will be asked to complete a light touch review based on Appreciative Inquiry principles which builds on existing strengths, aspirations and opportunities to identify:
 - the hopes of each local church for the future
 - an end of life or a growth plan
 - opportunities to start new places for new people and for community engagement
 - a strategy for worship and discipleship development

The review will be repeated on a 3 year cycle to support continued reflection on what has been learnt, a realistic appraisal of outcomes and an opportunity to focus again on 'Our

Calling'. A number of circuits have carried out reviews in recent years and, where this is the case, any review will support and build upon what has already been discovered.

- Learning for Discipleship and Ministry – with the support of the Regional Learning Network Team, the district will seek intentionally to create accessible opportunities for learning and spiritual development which supports growth in the following areas of our life together:
 - excellence and diversity in worship and growth in understanding and experience of worship
 - growth in a Methodist way of life
 - confidence in sharing faith and speaking out for justice
 - the development of vocations (lay and ordained)
 - a local ministry programme to support existing and future lay ministries
 - targeted work with (including ministries amongst) young people, older people and in inter-generational church
 - developing communities of practice to support particular forms of ministry (e.g. children and young people, the elderly, rural, urban, pioneering)
 - developing a culture of Positive Working Together
 - excellence in collaborative, participatory leadership – including MDR, supervision and continuing development in ministry (lay and ordained)

- A Strategy for New Places for New People – in parallel with the Connexional Evangelism and Growth strategy, the district is committed to developing projects and communities whose primary aim is to start, build and reproduce new Christian communities among unaffiliated people. To this end, the district will:
 - concentrate support (human and financial) on communities and projects which seek to create new forms of Christian community
 - develop existing work on pioneering pathways and with a pioneer community of practice
 - seek to encourage and nurture pioneering ministries and leaders
 - support work in church planting, fresh expressions and missional communities
 - to focus in particular in supporting new work and community in places of need

- Safeguarding – the district aspires to create a culture within which safeguarding is seen as a positive value which underpins everything we do and a Church which is a safe space for all. This means we will:
 - promote the welfare of children, young people and adults
 - work to prevent abuse from occurring
 - seek to encourage and nurture pioneering ministries and leaders
 - seek to protect and respond well to those that have been abused

- Buildings, Finances and Church Governance Structures – in parallel with the Our Calling review, the district will work with circuits to review their property and finance strategies and governance structures to enable:
 - a clearer focusing of assets to ensure support for circuit income streams

- a property strategy which ensures buildings which are appropriate for purpose or which can be used for income generation or disposal
 - a modelling of different ways of being circuit (e.g. multi-site or minster models) to support structures which are simpler and more manageable
 - shared resource structures across the district to support local churches and circuits in fulfilling their governance responsibilities
 - a strategy for congregational support and intervention – building upon work developed in other districts (e.g. Chester and Stoke), the district will develop a Circuit Enabling Group which supports circuits at particular points of transition and change and provide support
- Policies and Structures – throughout 2019-20 the district will realign its structures and its policies to focus on these core areas of activity.

5. Conclusion

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to God's love in Jesus Christ. This is a reminder, a liberation and a permission: it does not all depend on us nor is our horizon just the Methodist Church. We are people of hope seeking a new heaven and a new earth, an Easter people called to respond in love, witness and service to all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, a community of the Spirit called to participate in God's mission. Whilst our horizon is not simply the Methodist Church we believe that God has called the Methodist Church for a purpose and that we have unique gifts to share with others as we share and respond to a gospel of grace.

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