

'Two Years On...'

I. The Original Vision

At the heart of the creation of the new district was a vision of London Methodism in mission together, more able to engage both with the life of London and with the changing realities of culturally diverse congregations in order to be 'Good news for the global city'

The main issue was not boundaries, but new ways of working as a district to resource local congregations, encourage collaborative partnerships, share good practice and release new gifts and energies. This would always require a culture change and two years on, while the direction feels very right the speed is sometimes frustratingly slow.

Nonetheless given the scale of the undertaking, not least at a time of significant connexional change and initiatives, some positive steps have been taken.

II. Achievements

A. Delivering the basics

Though easy to forget, from a standing start the District has been able to provide the support and resources required of all Districts.

- Ministers have been stationed and welcomed;
 - vocational panels have met;
 - groups have been set up to support probationers, those in the first years of ministry and others,
 - individual pastoral care has been offered;
 - circuit policy reviews have been enabled;
 - grants have been made, property schemes and authorisations processed –
- the list is extensive, and properly so.

B. Emerging identity

The Chairs have, between us, preached in half the circuits in the District in the last two weeks as we've welcomed ministers. Some of them new churches to us, others not, but all of them have, often in a prominent place a District Cross, presented to them at the launch, and still up in churches. In an increasing number of places there is also on show a copy of the District Map which locates every church and circuit in the district. People are beginning to ask for the new edition of the prayer handbook as they commit themselves to praying for the life and work of the circuits and the district. People are beginning to recognise the funny symbol on our liturgical scarves as being the District logo and some are even noticing that the colour scheme is that of the District logo!

Something else we noticed at the welcome services was that we couldn't repeat the sermon! (Even if it were appropriate and we wanted to) people are

travelling across the District, north to south, east to west and even diagonally in order to support others at significant moments and so we are

discovering the complex web of networks and relationships that already exist and which need to be harnessed.

As stories are told, we recognise ourselves in one another's stories. We belong together – We are the London District. We are people who enjoy celebrations and parties. Whilst on a district level it is perhaps hard to repeat the spectacular of the launch, across the churches and circuits we are finding reasons to celebrate and discovering opportunities to do so as a District – opportunities such as the testimony service for those who are to be ordained (Wesley Day 2009) rather than simply celebrating in our own circuits. We are people who are active in our communities (witness the testimonies of MPs and Mayors and community groups at the welcome services). We are people who actively share our stories & celebrate good practice. Is it too much to say that we are developing a 'can do' culture ?

C. Increasing collaboration:

The District is large and complex and exploring ways of working more effectively by working together is a key theme. The good news to celebrate is the increasing sense of common purpose to be found: in regular meetings of all 41 superintendents or of their Circuit Stewards; in informal cross-Circuit training initiatives; through central London events supported by the whole District; through engagement in co-consultancy or mentoring schemes. The District team itself tries to model collaborative ways of working – and we are hugely aware of how many benefits that can bring.

D. Training

Paul Kybird in his former role as Training and Development Officer has organised a number of training days in Central London locations. These have been Incredible events with up to a 100 people, from across the District sharing together wisdom, insight and experience as they reflect together on what it means to be a Steward in the London District, or at how we engage with the Bible in this global city, or how we work well with children and young people. Those who have attended have discovered the amazing richness of the London District – our sheer size makes for richer opportunities.

Paul has also been instrumental in developing a number of Local Preacher initiatives. The access course – an intensive 1 year course involving 6 residential weekends and weekly evening tutorials at Central Hall. It was designed as a way of helping to nurture those who want to test their call to preach but who may need additional support with the learning processes and assignments. It is also suitable for those whose career, educational or other commitments make it difficult for them to commit to regular study over a long

period. Some 22 or 23 people so far benefited from it. The District challenge was launched last September. We aimed within 2 years to recruit and train 20 local preachers under 20 years old, to recruit and train a further 20 local preachers under 40 years old, and to encourage every circuit to recruit and train 10 worship leaders. Across the District we believe things are moving. How's the challenge going in your circuit?

A generous grant from the Laing Trust has enabled us to set up a District Worship Resources Centre on the 4th floor of Central Hall. This will be available to all local preachers and worship leaders in the District, providing books and on line resources, work stations and IT support for students on the Faith and Worship or Worship leaders courses together with training opportunities both for new and established preachers and tutors.

E. Connexional significance

While the scale of London is unique, it is recognised that many of the issues and opportunities contained within the district have a wider connexional significance. That's partly about learning from the experience of a large district at a time when others are beginning to review their futures; partly about the particular London factors. Currently we are submitting two projects – working with cultural diversity and reshaping the national Youth initiative – which are likely to have implications for ways of Methodist working well beyond London.

F. More secure structure

Where would we be without Nwabisa, our administrator, patiently guiding us and reminding us of what needs to be done, keeping up to date our records and directories? The District Resource centre has been established. The data we inherited was patchy and indeed it can still be difficult to obtain information from circuits, but the data we hold is richer. We are much clearer about who's around and who's responsible for what and we are constantly working on this to keep our database up to date and useable as a more effective tool for mission. And of course, at last our website no longer the thorn in the flesh but is up and running and available for you to discover resources and to share news of events or stories or job opportunities.

G. Flexibility

It was never true that, as a District, we had a totally clean sheet with which to start – there were always some givens to be met – but we have seized as much freedom as we could handle in setting up the ways we work ! Clearly there have been errors and omissions and we have tried to learn from them as well as build on the successes. Two key areas for improvement at present are youth provision and communication, as well as a refocusing of the work of the Commissions. The District is a work in progress and is always likely to remain so – we rejoice in the opportunities that brings !

III. CHALLENGES

Two years on, I am increasingly aware of how blessed we are as a District and I want to begin by inviting you to:

A. Recognise Assets

- Here in the Capital of our nation, we have Property worth tens of millions of pounds, some of it in prime locations which we could not get for love nor money if we were trying to acquire them today;
- We have been blessed with People – more than 22,000 of them who have been prepared to stand up and sign up, saying, 'I want to express my discipleship in and through the Methodist Church.' And what richness and diversity there is among those people –
 - scores, no, hundreds of young people who dare to swim against the current of materialism and self-centredness and commit themselves to learning what it means to follow Christ in the Church and in the world today;
 - people from more than 50 different nation and language groups, who in the communion of the Spirit, unite as one Body in praise of Christ who reveals to us the love of the one God who is Creator of all;
- And I am conscious of how blessed I have been, and how we all benefit from the shared leadership that we have in this District –
 - The devotion and commitment of our Officers; let me name in particular, Michael and Kathleen and Bala, who give hours of their time to help keep the District going;
 - let me name, Paul whose creativity, sheer hard work and willingness to turn his hand to anything (from finding doughnuts that will restore the blood sugar levels of those taking part in a study day, to naming and wrestling with the theological and practical issues that get in the way of our mission) – behind many of the achievements that have been listed today is the vision and quiet perseverance that Paul brings to the team;
 - and then there is Nwabisa (Nwabs), God's grace given to us daily in one who bears with our shortcomings and in the gentlest of ways helps hold together the operation of the District Centre;
 - there are the Conveners of the Commissions and the Secretaries of Committees and Working Groups – we are blessed;
 - And, after eight years of working in a totally different way as the Chair of the former London North East District, I have known myself blessed

in being able to work with Jenny and Stuart to fulfil the responsibilities of Chairing this delightful, complex and challenging District, a task that would be totally beyond the ability of any one person to deliver.

It is so easy to talk ourselves down and to begin to believe all the negative propaganda that says that the Church is dying and there is no hope; it is not true, and I am inviting us all this morning to 'Count our Blessings –' Recognise our Assets.

But to be realistic, we would then also have to name a second challenge which is to

B. Resist Threats

I have seen my colleagues spend countless hours dealing with the damage and dysfunctionality that has arisen over the past two years. The complexity and the intensity of some of the situations has been more horrendous than almost anything I experienced in my previous eight years – and there have been certainly far more of them. Why?

I believe that increasingly, because of the complexity and scale of the District we face the threat of

1. Diversity becoming Divergence

We celebrate our Diversity, and rightly so; but it is a short step from the enrichment of diversity to the discouragement of separation and schism. The letter to the Ephesians urges us, 'Spare no effort to preserve the unity of the body, bound together in peace.'

Or, there is the threat of

2. Distrust breeding Division

There can be an insidious but fatally dangerous shift from a position where we are not sure what they are doing; to one where we are sure that they are up to no good, and that they are out to get us, or to get rid of us. That movement is not merely dangerous, I name it as demonic. Differences and disagreements there will always be within the Church – that has always been the case, but we are called not merely to give one another the benefit of the doubt, we are called to accept one another in love.

And then there is the threat of

3. Defensiveness blocking Development

Our Gospel is about extravagant generosity; giving lavishly, unstintingly, not counting the cost. In spite of what I have said about all our blessings – the assets we have at our disposal – there is a perception that we are in danger of going under and there is a tendency to retrenchment and defensiveness: 'We

don't know what is around the corner, so let us make sure that we hang on to what we've got.'

I believe that this is totally contrary to the Gospel pattern; it is by giving that we receive; five loaves and two small fish that seemed barely enough to keep one boy going for a day, turns out to be the means of feeding more than 5,000 men plus women and children as well; our Gospel is about the whole always being more than the sum of the parts and if we dare to offer our part to the rest of our brothers and sisters we shall find that we are better off than we were before.

Allowing people to use their gifts serving the kingdom through Circuit and District initiatives may be the very means of finding a way forward for your local church or fellowship group.

Synod members, two years on, I want us to rise to the Challenge and Resist the threats of Diversity becoming Divergence; Distrust breeding Division; and Defensiveness blocking Development.

But that means I should like to see us respond to the Challenge to

C. Refocus Efforts

In July, the District Chairs together with the TDO, the Staff from the District Centre, District Officers and Commission Conveners, spent a day reviewing the work of the District and reflecting on possibilities for future development. We recalled the twin foci of the District's operation – helping churches and Circuits to be more truly fit for purpose and to fulfil their vocation in the 250 places where we are found; and to be Good News in the City as a whole as we engage directly with governance and the social challenges of the London as a whole.

1. Refocusing Locally

In the year ahead we will see the rolling out of the EDEV programme – Extending Discipleship, Exploring Vocation – we want to challenge each member to consider further what it means for each one of us to be a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ; we want to find ways of touching the lives of everyone who is part of the Methodist Church so that everyone is more conscious of the call of God in their lives and can find some means of growing in grace. The Connexion and the District are working together to appoint someone who will be called a Discipleship and Training Officer who will lead this development.

While we recognise that the Church is far more than the gathering of believers on a Sunday, nevertheless we recognise how much depends on the experience of worship that people have when they gather, either Sunday by Sunday, or on other days in their local churches; and we recognise also that the quality of that experience depends so much on the character, the training and the openness to the Spirit of God of the people who are the leaders of such gatherings. So as a

District we want to build on the excellent start that has been made in the Access Course for Local Preachers. We have received a grant from the Laing Trust which we are using to create a base here that will provide resources and personnel to support people who want to be better equipped for this particular area of service.

2. Refocusing at District Level

Two years on, we believe that it is right to make some adjustments to District groups and structure and ways of working.

- We have clarified the roles of the Commissions and we will begin to see the benefits in their work in the coming months;
- We have listened to the concerns about Communications and we will be hearing later in this Synod about a proposal to appoint an additional member of staff who will improve our capacity in this area;
- The agenda of public issues in London can appear almost overwhelming, but among all the possibilities, I have become convinced after two years that we need to focus particularly on the development of young people – in the city, as well as in the Church; and we have to find some way of engaging – appropriately and realistically – with issues of redevelopment, embracing concerns relating both to the environment and to matters of community cohesion.

Two years on, I am still sure that we have a part to play in God's Mission in London. We thank God for the Vision that led to our coming into being and for all that has been achieved by grace in the first two years; let us in hope and faith, but above all, in love, rise to this Challenge and commit ourselves to being a people who will live out what we believe and proclaim – that, two years on, or ten years on, we will still be Good News in this Global City.