



Presentation of the London District Vision to the Representative Session of the Synod 9th April 2011, by the Rev. Jenny Impey

The District Review's first recommendation was that "the District needs to consider its original aspirations and whether these hold for the future".

You'll recall that we worked together around tables for a considerable part of the Autumn synod. The District Council received pages of submissions from the groups and carefully reviewed them all. In summary, you said

"Yes but..."

Yes, we affirm the original aspirations and don't want to move away from the essence of the original vision BUT:

- It is not inclusive enough (circuits on the edge who don't identify with London are excluded)
- It's perhaps a little misleading – giving a sense that the District is other than us.
- It's not widely understood – you need to spell out what engagement with civic life and public issues means
- It was perhaps a bit too ambitious – giving rise to impossible expectations – the tension between big vision and the reality of trying to engage with a city as large and complex as London with all its shifting alliances
- It ignores the day to day life of our churches and the regular routine work of the District.
- There is no strategy nor values to go with the vision
- There is a need for better communication of what we are about and what is happening and what has been achieved.
- It doesn't say what district should do as District as distinct from what the circuits within the district should do
- It ignores the task of Evangelism

So in response the Council has sought to maintain the essence of the original vision but restate it in a way that we believe is more helpful.

Therefore we've begun by spelling out more carefully in the preamble to the vision who the District is:

The London District of the Methodist Church currently comprises 23,000 members, 257 ministers, 245 churches and 40 circuits and their projects together with a number of educational institutions (*Southlands College, Farringtons School and the Guy Chester Centre*). We are a diverse group of people originating from many different countries and communities who find ourselves worshipping and witnessing

together in urban, suburban and more rural areas. We have come together in the belief that we are better together and our intention is to contribute to the well-being of each other, of this global city and the surrounding areas; and of the wider Methodist Church.

We are people called by God to be disciples of Jesus who for a time (we recognise that people are here for shorter or longer times) find ourselves worshipping and fellowshiping and witnessing together and who with the coming into being of the London District have chosen to be together in the belief that we are better together, we can make a difference by joining together in the mission to which God has called us.

As the people, churches and projects of the London regional District of the Methodist Church our mission is:

To share the good news of Jesus Christ throughout Greater London and the surrounding areas, and to improve the wellbeing of people and their communities by:

This is a mission statement that has Jesus at the centre

We're here not for ourselves but rather we're here to do the work of the kingdom: To share the good news of Jesus – in both word and action – evangelism and service.

We're here to share the good news in the context in which we currently find ourselves – Greater London and the surrounding areas – both are important and neither must be neglected!

Through this sharing we believe that the wellbeing of people and their communities will be improved – because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news – the hungry are fed, the poor hear good news, and people are invited to participate in the way of Christ, knowing that they are loved and valued and accepted!

There are 3 main ways in which we'll do this:

- **Engaging pastorally and prophetically in the communities in which our churches are located and in the wider region**

This is civic engagement restated.

We tested this wording out on circuit stewards and there was some hesitation about what pastorally and prophetically meant – they understood once it was explained but wondered whether a vision statement shouldn't contain easier to understand language.

We responded by saying yes and no! Everything we tried to replace it with somehow ended up watering down the theological richness of the original statement.

Caring for people and challenging injustice in our communities was perhaps the favoured alternative suggestion but surely this is only part of the story.

“Pastorally” comes from the pastoral picture in John's gospel of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and who seeks to bring life it all its fullness,

which is infinitely richer than just caring for the sheep. It requires us to ask questions about the purpose of our caring and echoes Ezekiel 34 where the good shepherd who cares for his/her sheep goes out looking for them, feeds them with good things, binds up the injured and strengthens the weak and feeds them with justice and begins to move us into the “prophetically” part of the vision as Ezekiel challenges the leaders of his community as to whether they are being faithful to their calling.

Challenging injustice is an essential part of a prophetic community but we are also called to point to where people are living God’s way of love and offer hope to people who see no hope, calling people to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before our God. We are called not just to respond to injustice but to be proactive in working for the kinds of community that God would rejoice in.

The language used demands that we engage in theological reflection together, demands that we look at our multitude of activities and ask whether they are leading people to life in all its fullness or just maintaining the status quo, meeting people’s practical needs without address the systems that keep people dependent and in it all we must never forget that being pastoral and being prophetic belong together and are two strands of the love of God for all people.

It will be the responsibility of the Social Responsibility Commission to facilitate delivery of this aspect of the vision and ensure we are faithful to our expressed intentions.

- **Equipping and developing faithful and fruitful disciples and congregations**

The wording again calls for discussion and reflection. Of course we want to develop disciples and congregations, but what kind of disciples and what kind of congregations?

The words we’ve chosen are faithful and fruitful – they come from John’s image of the vine in Chapter 15 where we are called to abide in Christ and in that way bearing much fruit, by allowing God’s love and God’s life to flow through us. Fruitfulness and faithfulness flow from living out the commandment to love. To love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. To love one another as God in Christ has loved us.

Our life together should bear fruit – whether it’s in an increased number of followers of Jesus through evangelism or more faithful disciples who encourage one another in more faithful discipleship and fellowship as we watch over one another in love.

It will be the responsibility of the Discipleship and Congregational Development Commission to facilitate delivery of this aspect of the vision and ensure we are faithful to our expressed intentions.

The commission will ensure we are provided with resources to help review the life of our churches and circuits, that we train and equip leaders and office holders, that we support and learn from the various Fellowships that make up the District and will point to resources that nurture disciples and much, much more.

We will also need to ask whether the variety of congregations is wide enough or whether we need to look to plant some new congregations, some fresh expressions of church to reach those who are alienated by our current practices or those whom they cannot reach.

- **Equipping and developing faithful and fruitful preachers and ordained ministers**

Faithful and fruitful again – we want the questions to be asked within our churches and circuits – what does it mean for ministers to be faithful and fruitful and how do we resource them so that their gifts can be used and calling fulfilled? How do we nurture and develop candidates and probationers and superintendents? How do we encourage them to give of their best and hold them accountable for fulfilling their calling within the context of the church?

It will be the responsibility of the Authorised Ministries Commission to facilitate delivery of this aspect of the vision and ensure we are faithful to our expressed intentions.

It may be a strange name but in giving the commission this title we are moving in the direction of the Connexion who are bringing into being the Ministries Committee from 1 September 2011 which will deal with all issues to do with the training, developing and sustaining of both ordained ministers and preachers and worship leaders.

The London District has a good record in supporting circuits to train preachers through the London Course. We want to sustain that but also want to work with circuits on developing preachers and ensuring their continuing faithfulness and fruitfulness as preachers as the world changes so rapidly.

In much the District, through the Commission will take a lead in this area, but we need to support you as through circuit stewards you seek to care for ministers, and as through staff meetings you seek to discern what it means to be faithful and fruitful and understand your calling in your context.

There are 3 strands to the mission and I have indicated that the intention is to have 3 commissions take responsibility for facilitating these areas of mission within the District and the circuits, for supporting churches and circuits in your mission and for seeing and responding to the big picture across London and the surrounding areas.

I hope that you begin to see that this formulation of the vision leads to a clearer structure within the District to support its delivery. If you accept it, the revised commissions will need to urgently meet in order to look at how they will do this and begin to set out in more detail their ways of working and what they intend to do over the coming year to support the delivery of the mission. They will also need to work with the District Council to produce some SMART goals for the next 3 years as per the District Review's 2nd recommendation.

The final challenge you set was for the ways of working to be spelt out:

Our ways of working include:

- Engaging in theological reflection and prayerful discernment which will help us to understand our mission more fully
- Building quality relationships across our circuits, with wider Methodism and with ecumenical, inter faith, and community groups
- Building quality relationships with civic and political authorities in the area covered by the District
- Seeking to communicate effectively and work collaboratively
- Living and working creatively with diversity and difference
- Deploying the resources over which we have stewardship effectively and flexibly
- Developing and sharing best practice

These are common strands that run throughout the implementation of the vision and our intention is that the commissions will hold these ways of working before them as they do their work but also that churches and circuits will engage with them as we seek to encourage and support one another in our common mission.

So there you have it. It remains a challenging vision. It doesn't consist of a sexy, memorable strap line but is rather a meaty gospel mission that encompasses the wide range of mission and discipleship that is being exercised across the District in a way which both affirms and challenges our work and in a way which encourages churches and circuits and the wider District to ask questions about what we are doing and why we are doing it and to examine whether in all our activity we are being faithful and fruitful to our ministry and calling.

Some of the words are not straightforward because like the gospel they challenge us to deeper reflection and to prayerful conversation with God and with others. Together with the commissions we will seek to produce some study material for churches and circuits and fellowship groups to use.

Who is the vision statement for? Primarily for the District leadership and commissions to keep us faithful to our task. However we also hope that circuit leadership teams will look at it in order to help your own conversations.

So there you have it! That's the renewed vision – it's one that I and the District Council are enthusiastic about and committed to. If the Synod adopts the vision, we can get on with forming the structures and looking at the strategic thinking and planning in more detail.

This is a vision statement that has Jesus at the centre and that takes seriously the comments expressed by Synod members.

As members of the London District, we're here not for ourselves but we're here to do the work of the Kingdom, **to share the good news of Jesus Christ throughout Greater London and the surrounding areas, and to improve the well-being of people and their communities.**