

THE LONDON (NEW RIVER) CIRCUIT



‘Discovering Talents...’

The New River Circuit was formed in 1995, and shares a challenging story – ‘this is a story of how 800 people from four churches have entered into new zones of enterprise and have committed themselves to raise £4.6 million. It is a story of vision and courage. It has happened without collusion but as a result of searching, thinking, praying and believing. Each has been faced at some time with the question, “how can we be the church in a changing and demanding situation?”’

Each of the churches has a story to tell, and will be covered in future volumes of ‘Writing the Next Chapter’. This story comes from Trinity at Bowes Methodist Church, and is followed by notes based on a conversation with the minister, Rev. David James.

Trinity at Bowes Methodist Church borders the London boroughs of Enfield and Haringey and is set alongside the hectic North Circular Road. In the 1920’s the church undertook a huge building scheme to accommodate the prolific Sunday School with seven hundred children and other activities associated with the church.

By the 1980s the church was wrestling with how to update these premises when their membership seemed to be in free fall. The difficult conclusion that many reached was that by selling off some of the building the future would be more sustainable. Six years ago as part of a Lenten study based on a Methodist publication, “Pilgrims’ Way” a fact finding survey revealed gaps in community provision. There developed a strong belief that the premises were a heritage that could serve the present age.

The result has been a scheme of partnerships and development that will result in the premises having up to three thousand users per week and offering a nursery, a selection of community rooms, a media room and counselling. At the core will be a meeting place offering a lounge with refreshments open on a daily basis. Three years ago the TAB Centre Plus project was launched. It is a £2 million scheme and the church is half way through the building programme. Here again there is the big question, “How will it all be financed?” And once again the belief that this is the logical way forward and this is the great opportunity.

What was the first step in this adventure?

We set out to deal with the sanctuary of the church, because everything generates from prayer and worship and makes the message of Pentecost clear, that the Spirit’s power is with you.

Why has work on property been so important?

In this part of London property is in demand. Buildings are precious and everyone wants to use them, including other Christian groups. The church is faced with the challenge of asking questions about what God is calling it to do and finding answers about how to use the inheritance of property in the changing scenes all around us over the last forty years. The challenge is how we can develop premises and see in that something of great value that works for people.

What lessons has Trinity learnt along the way?

- The importance of finding resonance in the communities around with the priorities of the church. This means getting into partnerships with interested people and having the vision to use the resources, the 'talents' of tradition, people and property.
- It is so important to develop clear plans that are balanced with great sensitivity in implementing them.
- The Gospels are to do with pioneering. Jesus sent out disciples in twos to break into new territory. Partnerships are very important, within the churches and with people outside the church.
- It's hard work – just to be there with the work, to try and understand, to be compassionate and considerate...and as well, getting on with filling the forms!
- People just do not realize how talented they are.

That all sounds exciting but also very difficult...

Opportunities often have an incredible cost, particularly when things don't work out well. Then we have to keep going, to understand that we are involved in something much bigger than us, and that what we are doing is right in God's sight. We are getting into new territory where a lot of individual needs can be met. One recent example is that at a meeting with the police it emerged that there are a lot of isolated people are afraid to come out of their homes. We have to ask, "How can we create times for such people to meet together?"

What are your priorities now?

We are at the second stage of building development and of community development. Providing a counselling service and finding people to get it off the ground is important. At the moment our Community Development Officer is spending a lot of time just meeting young people, to find out what they are actually thinking. We need to try to design what kids really need, rather than offer a pre-planned package that's just about filling their time and not aiming to be creative in terms of the gifts and abilities they have. It's back to the 'Talents' again and the ways in which when we are faced with what seems to be a negative we can turn it into something positive!

QUESTIONS:

- What do you think your church might be able to learn from the experience of Trinity at Bowes Methodist Church? What are the most difficult decisions your church has faced? How did you make these decisions?

- How well is your church using its resources of property? What might there be to learn from this story?
- What is your experience in your own church life of the sorts of partnerships mentioned? How important are such partnerships? What problems might occur in trying to develop them?
- In your opinion how good is your church at listening to the local communities? What do you think are the best ways of going about that listening?
- How easy and important do you feel it is to make sure that 'everything generates from prayer and worship' in church life? What can be done to make sure it happens?

Bible Study: Matthew 25:14 - 30 - The Parable of the Talents.

- What are your reactions to this story?
- What does the success of the two servants who took risks suggest for today's church?
- Why might people bury 'talents'? Why do you think one who had least buried his?
- How we best help people recognize the 'talents' and gifts they have?
- What are the 'talents' of your church? How well used are they for the community? How might they be used better?