

Summer 2017

Dear Friends,

Many of you know that I retire this summer, after thirty-four years in Circuit ministry, twenty-one of them as a Superintendent. For Methodist Ministers, 'retirement' isn't quite the right word. Ministry will continue in one way or another, but as a Supernumerary Minister, I will have permission to 'sit down', no longer appointed to have pastoral charge in a Circuit. Ministry without specific responsibility has its attractions. As I approach the Circuit 'Farewell Service' at 6pm on Sunday 30th July at Christ Church and a move to our retirement home 160 miles away, I thought it might be timely to offer a few reflections...

After leaving a seven-year teaching career, I trained for Circuit ministry at what was then called The Queen's College, an ecumenical training centre for Anglican, Methodist, URC and others in Birmingham. I began Circuit ministry in 1983. Over the years, I've been content to work out my ministry in local Circuits with local churches; in north Staffordshire, South Staffordshire & the Black Country, Telford and, finally, here in Croydon. There have also been opportunities to serve in District roles – these have been real privileges. Ministry has been diverse, always interesting and often challenging. It has been a privilege to share good news in all kinds of situations, both within the church and the wider community. Here in the Croydon Circuit I have been delighted to serve the congregations at Christ Church, South Norwood and, this year, share something of the work at Norbury. I continue to be amazed at the commitment and generosity of so many in our local churches.

The nature of Circuit life has changed and that is a continuing challenge. Designed as a tool for planting new societies and promoting Methodist emphases, Circuits were very effective. After more than a century of decline, I increasingly wonder if the Circuit is still the best way of being Methodism in practice. Does it simply allow strength to support weakness to the detriment of our calling and the diminishing of strength where we have it? The society we live and serve in is very different from the days when Methodists numbered more than a million and was a growing vibrant community. Today we stand at 188,000 members and the challenges we face are huge. In comparison with our key emphases on offering an opportunity for a loving relationship with God through Jesus, open to all people; the possibility of transformation of personal lives through Spirit-led discipleship, and the pursuit of social holiness, effectively expressed in local community and impacting our national life, the business of sustaining Circuit seems to absorb a lot of time and energy as we struggle to keep the ship afloat.

As a family, we have been blessed by generous and deep relationships with so many people in the Methodist community. Sue and I come from generations of Methodists, including preachers, ministers, a past Vice-President of the former Primitive Methodist Church, and a Sister in what was 'NCH', it is a joy that our own children are committed to Christian life and community, but it is a sadness that this is not in the Methodist Church. The ties of inherited tradition are not as strong as they once were, especially when considerations of context and culture are taken into account. How far each of our local churches offers an experience of church that is relevant to the lives of every age group today is something we must continue to address.

Over the years, ministry has brought times of fulfilment and the sense of a job well done, as well as times of frustration and challenge, some of it extra-ordinary. Leading worship and preaching in a pastoral context, sharing in the big 'life moments' of baptisms and blessings, marriages and funerals, seeing faith come to life, encouraging growing churches, opportunities to engage with local communities; all these have been delights. Some of the internal conflicts that have come my way have been less happy; conflict saps so much energy and distracts from our primary purpose.

The opportunity to serve in London was unexpected. Sharing in the wonderful diversity of God's people in local churches has been thrilling. As I come to retirement, I know I shall miss them. It has also been good to connect with some of our historic Churches and feel the depth of that narrative in which our own stories are written. Opportunities to visit and worship in places like Wesley's Chapel, for example, have made me acutely aware of those who have gone before us. Behind the pulpit there, to the left-hand side, is a plaque commemorating the remarkable early Methodist ministries of John and Mary Fletcher. A priest in the Church of England and colleague of John and Charles Wesley, Fletcher was Vicar of Madeley in Shropshire. He was also a leading writer in defence of the Methodist emphasis on sanctification. Whilst in the Telford Circuit, I had the unwelcome but privileged task of preaching the final sermon in the later Fletcher Memorial Church in Madeley. I recalled that at the 1985 Conference, the President, Revd Chris Hughes Smith, had invited those of us who were being received into Full Connexion and ordained to 'guard the holy fire'. As Methodist work at Fletcher Memorial came to an end, it felt that that fire was burning a little less brightly, though it was passed to others in God's Church.

As I come to end of my 'active' Circuit ministry I also reflect on the city in which we live. With its vibrant life, its joyful, though sometimes noisy, expressions of community, its business and activity, we face huge pressures, some of which seem to threaten our common life and values. Disparity of economic capacity, the shortage of housing, the scandalous necessity of Food Banks, the sense of alienation from the corridors of power felt by so many, the rise of extremism, together with a series of tragedies all affect our sense of well-being. As those called to 'guard' the holy fire of love that is God's presence in our world and in our city, Christians, with others, have an enormous contribution to make. May God give us grace to continue to be a sign that God's good purposes for all people are not done with yet, and that, even as Methodists, we can continue to play our part in the life of our city and especially in the life of our Borough.

May God bless you as you journey on. May those who come to join you in the work find it to be a happy journey. Seek to serve the present age. Be strong in the Spirit, hold fast to faith in Jesus and live as children of a loving heavenly Father.

With every blessing,

Peter S. Clark
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