

One of the most profound, arresting, and disturbing things I've ever heard is when someone said to me 'It's not that the Church of God has got a mission, but that the God of mission has got a church'.

It was one of those moments when the way you think as a Christian turns completely upside down, and you realise that it's just actually gone the right way up.

We think our churches belong to us - they don't, we are trustees, stewards, we hold them on God's behalf because we, the church, belong to God. We think worship on a Sunday is the most important thing we do - it's not, mission is more important than worship. Think about it - we have been faithfully worshipping for decades, hoping new people will come, and we can give them a great welcome. The figures speak for themselves, they are decreasing.

Christmas is God's ultimate missionary activity. God leaves divine comfort and enters human experience, as Charles Wesley wrote "emptied himself of all but love". The scriptures have no donkey, no inn keeper, and the nativity story as we tell it is a myth, wrapped around a legend, which is part of a deeply profound ancient saga, that has at its heart an impossible mystery!

Yet we claim it to be true that love came down at Christmas!

That is mission. Mary pondering the child she held in her arms depicted in so many Christmas cards, the shepherds rushing to see the thing that had happened, the magi following a star and bringing prophetic gifts in defiance of Herod's orders - that all counts as worship, but the mission of God came first. God, the baby, was laid in a manger.

Considering the Circuit Vision 'a Faithful and Fruitful Future' has taken up a lot of time and effort by the Circuit Leadership team during the months of this pandemic. (The Circuit Leadership team is all the ministers, the Circuit Stewards, co-opted members Ian White and Heather Staniland, and the Circuit Administrator Daniel Keen). We have had a chance to reflect on what is meant by mission in this circuit, and what it means. What we have learnt about ourselves that the pandemic has shown us, and what our priorities must be as we emerge from lockdown. The future of this circuit must be mission shaped. The future of all our churches must be mission shaped. The future of the work of all our Mission areas must be just that - areas of mission! Each of us is a missionary, it is fundamental to being Christian. Going out, coming out, sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ and witnessing people and communities respond is our only business. Speaking, preaching, living, and doing the gospel so that it transforms this world is what the Kingdom of God is all about.

If our faith is to have any credibility or claim in a world of vaccine deniers, fake news, conspiracy theories, poverty, unemployment and injustice, we must grow up in our believing, our thinking, what we say and what we do. Who we are and what we are here for are vital questions to ask in times of crisis such as this. The Circuit Vision we already have helps us to think and plan.

Love came down at Christmas - that's the conviction of my heart and has been an emotional conviction since I was 17. It has become deepened and strengthened and more mysterious the more I have studied the scriptures and reflected prayerfully on my own experience and the saints I have read about and known. It must drive a conviction to share that experience whether it is through a cafe project, contemporary worship, silent times of

prayer and weekly fellowship, a coffee morning, Food Bank, outdoor nativity, or just plain good neighbourliness.

This coming year - the Methodist Conference may well vote on the minimum size of a church, and raise the figure from the current 7 active members to form a Church Council, up to maybe 25. That will have huge repercussions in a Circuit where all of a sudden about half of our chapels will not be big enough to be independent churches. I know Jesus said 'where two or three are gathered I will be there', and he said it in defiance of Jewish rules of the time that required 10 adult males. I also know his passion was the gospel and seeing the Kingdom rather than sustaining a declining institution. Jesus was on mission!

Love came down at Christmas. To Love God and love the world is God's mission - as we gather round the stable, adore the Christ child, and hum our carols this year, let's remember what the God of mission has got us for!

I pray that despite all the restrictions and considerations, Christmas will be a happy time, we can look after each other, and enter the new year in Hope!

Your friend and Superintendent Minister,

Rob.

Rev Rob Hilton.

PS - A note about the Plan: It has been made online (a very big thank you to Rob Weir), but will not be printed until at least the March-May Issue. Preachers know their appointments, and as I write we're trying to make arrangements to communicate them to the churches - if in doubt please don't hesitate to contact Daniel our circuit administrator. As we one day will emerge from lockdown restrictions, the plan will look different. Some churches may not have survived the damaging effects of the pandemic, yet we must continue with the online, phone, or written communications that have enabled some to feel more included in the Church's fellowship than for a long time. Please bear with us during interim changes and new arrangements being made. And if you've got questions - your minister circuit stewards, or myself are here for you.

*Please forward information to be put into the next Circuit Newsletter to Daniel Keen, 1108info.cheshiresouth@gmail.com or phone **07598 580541** by Wednesday 27th January – Thank you*