



North Kent Methodist Circuit

grapevine

CIRCUIT NEWS

*"The Kingdom of Heaven
is like a grain of
mustard seed..."*

MATT.13:31



inside...

THINKING SMALL
SHARING THE MIRACLE
OF JESUS ON ZOOM

Issue Eighteen
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Thinking small...

When I was in my early 20s, a woman twice my age repeatedly invited me to join her weekly Bible Study. Though I had grown up in the church, I was reluctant. What would they find to talk about week after week? I already went to church every Sunday; wasn't that enough? What if the discussion got awkward? What if they had views that I disagreed with? But I considered this woman a friend, and I finally realised that if I wanted to keep her as a friend, I probably needed to give her Bible Study a chance.

So I went one week. And then the next. And then stayed on for the next twenty years until we moved away. Attending that small group Bible Study was one of the most important spiritual disciplines in my entire life. It helped me better align my day-to-day work and family and personal life with my spiritual life. It made me more aware of what was going on with other people in their lives and that I wasn't the only one struggling at times. It kept me accountable in a non-intrusive way. It gave me a community of support. It helped me hear more clearly what God was saying to me. It sharpened my spiritual awareness.

Since leaving that group, I've become a minister and had several opportunities to join or start other small groups in the various communities where I've been sent. Each has had its own special flavour and interests and style. Some have steered clear of the 'Bible Study' or 'Prayer Group' labels that have seemed too restrictive or 'churchy'. Each has been valuable in its own way.

In this issue of *Grapevine*, we're sampling some of the wealth of small groups currently available in our circuit. A genuine benefit of the pandemic lockdown has been recognising both that we need to interact with each other in small groups and that we don't necessarily need to be physically with each other to enjoy the small group dynamics. We've learned to do small groups by Zoom or phone, and we've found ways to join up with others with interests in topics and styles that might not be popular or available at our own local church.

In presenting this variety of small groups, we're hoping that more people in the circuit will find a small group to join – or get inspired to try something new with an existing small group – or maybe start up a new one. The early Methodist Church found its strength in the classes and bands, the small groups that fed the individuals as well as fed the corporate worship. It might even be easier to invite a friend to try out your small group than to attend worship with you. Perhaps it's time to think small again.

As a circuit we've also been thinking over the past many years about the challenges that 'small churches' face and how best to provide support. This issue of *Grapevine* includes two articles about churches which have closed and another about a church which changed to meet its circumstances. There are many creative possibilities for considering how best to use our resources to support worship and fellowship. In the context of 'thinking small', perhaps the essential bit is to

recognise that being a 'church' is not the only way – or sometimes even the best way – to support our spiritual growth and fellowship amongst small groups.

Meanwhile, new legislation expected to come through Annual Conference this summer indicates that the minimum number of members needed to qualify as a 'church' will be extended from six to 12. That larger number recognises that a 'church' has more organisational and legal responsibilities – and even different purposes – than a small group. An effective church is made up of several small groups that can join together for corporate worship and can carry trusteeship for various activities and responsibilities, whilst a 'small group' has a more particular responsibility for nourishing fellowship and discipleship. Perhaps it's time to recognise and celebrate the blessings that 'small groups' offer without requiring each become or continue as a church as well.

So many of Jesus' parables focused on the power of the 'small': the mustard seed, the widow's mite, and the lilies of the field come to mind. The stories of the lost coin and the lost lamb also remind us that God cares for each of us in our 'smallness' – and yet the true power and glory comes when we join our 'smallness' together into the fullness of God's kingdom.

Bonni-Belle

Sharing the Miracle of Jesus on Zoom



A PJ Church at Larkfield

"Exciting" and "fun" are not words usually associated with Lent, but they really describe the newest "small group" that we started up for Lent at Larkfield. Out of concern about the long-term effects of lockdown on our children's ministry came the idea of PJ Church on Zoom. PyJama Church (we meet at 9.30 on Sunday mornings!) or more reverently **Praise Jesus Church** was launched, with the aim of bringing together children from our various groups, and we were thrilled when eight children arrived on our screens on the first Sunday morning. Numbers have fluctuated, but the Sunday after the clocks changed and we missed an hour's sleep, there were 10 children waiting for their weekly Sunday service. Ages range from two to nine, so even if they can't sit still, they do enjoy a good bounce to the songs.

Our themes throughout Lent have been focussed on Jesus – as Carpenter, Fisherman, Miracle Maker, Storyteller, Healer, and now through Palm Sunday to Easter when our final session is Jesus is Alive! On Zoom we have watched story videos, sung action songs, jumped and danced in praise of Jesus. We have done scavenger hunts and even built houses on rock and sand.

At the end of our initial seven weeks it was time to reflect. Do we continue on Zoom, and if so, how often, or can we soon get back live to Breakfast Church, Messy Church, Brigades, and Toddlers' Club? Whatever way, worship has changed for some of us. The Miracle of Jesus on Zoom!

"Bag Ministry" at Larkfield continued with letters, booklets and themed cards at the start of Lent, Mothering Sunday posies, and recently Easter bags for all our contacts. 85 adult bags, reaching over 115 adults, and 55 children's bags were distributed to let our people know that they are remembered, loved and



valued. Those who delivered them experienced amazing gratitude but also heard many sad stories of isolation and loneliness as they stood listening, two metres away from front doors.

Dial-in Service

A small group which would never have happened without lockdown, has been the fortnightly **Dial-in service** on Thursday mornings, set up for the benefit of those who don't have internet, specifically for the Revd Naomi's churches. We chat, we pray, and have a Bible reading and reflection. Numbers vary between 10 and 18 and I never cease to be amazed at how many can manage to dial in with the complicated procedure of dialling 31 digits! Zoom doesn't make telephone access easy!

In a very similar way, I lead a small reflection group at Lawson House (flats for independent living) in Larkfield. We have an easier time as these folk come in on one click on their i-pads or laptops. However, the value of keeping in regular touch with older folk proves once again to be invaluable, when the enemy they know most acutely is isolation.

Monica Wilding



Crossover Bible study

This Zoom meeting takes place on a Tuesday evening from 8.30pm. We are meeting weekly with the intention of reading the Bible from beginning to end, while getting a better understanding of what it has to say. At the time of writing this, we are going through the Old Testament book of Proverbs. If you are interested in joining us, please contact me on alanconnor359@btinternet.com

Crossover Prayer meeting

On 6 May last year, during lockdown, it was realised that there was a need to have an on-line prayer meeting. A few of us who were willing to pray about situations set up a small weekly group on Zoom, meeting on a Wednesday evening from 7.30pm. We have been blessed to see God's willingness to answer prayer. If you are interested in joining us, please contact me on alanconnor359@btinternet.com



The group without a name

I am a part of a small group which was set up towards the end of 2019. We managed to meet a few times in each other's homes, enjoying food and chatter, before the world changed – and now we've been gathering together online for a year. Some of us have never met in person, but we've developed a strong bond during these strange months. We are a disparate group of 20-40 somethings (age group) who attend different churches (including denominations) and none, but together we explore some of life's big questions. We've looked at the LICC Fruitfulness on the Frontline resource, we've explored spiritual gifts, and we've just started Alpha. We take it in turns to prepare and lead sessions, and we try to remember to end in prayer. We also have a WhatsApp group, which has been used to share prayer requests, family news, and a reminder of which Friday evening we're meeting!

Claire Boxall



Small Groups with Medway Chinese Methodist Church

The Medway Chinese Methodist Church has a variety of small groups which have met for many years and nearly everyone in MCMC belongs to one. During the pandemic, these small groups have continued to meet via Zoom.

The Maidstone Group meets on Mondays at 10.30am and has been studying 'The Sermon on the Mount,' 'The Kingdom of God' in the parables of Jesus, and now the subject is 'This is Our Faith.' This group has 18-20 people so it often divides into two smaller groups for discussion and then gathers together afterwards. The group speaks Cantonese and has several families from Hong Kong who join the group virtually.

'The Timothy Group' meets on Wednesdays at 10.30am and has been mainly studying the Pauline Letters. There are 7-9 people in the group, and the language is Cantonese.

The 'Mandarin Chinese Group' meets at 11am on Thursdays. We have studied 'The Kingdom of God' in the parables of Jesus and now we are studying 'This is Our Faith.' There are 10-12 people in the group.

A Prayer Meeting open to all is at 11am on Fridays

Recently we have set up a 'Song of Songs' group for the pastoral care of married couples. Group A meets once a month at 11am on Sunday with nine couples. Group B meets once a month at 2pm on Saturday and has five couples.

We expect many more Cantonese people to be arriving from Hong Kong in the near future. We are eager to establish another small group that includes English-speaking British people so that we can do Bible study together and the newcomers can practise their conversational English skills. If you would like to be a part of this, please contact the Revd Paul Lau or the Revd Bonni-Belle Pickard.

Revd Paul Lau



'Thought for The Day'

A Group at Union Street, Maidstone

Nearly ten years ago, a small group developed as a response to the Frontline initiative. At first, we opened the church for all comers on a Tuesday morning. This included having lunch together and a short time of prayer and reflection. In 2019, we noticed our numbers had fallen somewhat, but during the first lockdown, the group decided to meet on Zoom and we have now increased our number to about 15, meeting each Tuesday morning at 11:00.

Our format includes an initial 15-20 minutes when those taking part share news about themselves and talk about current issues that have come to their attention or are of concern to them. Following this informal introduction, each

week a member of the group takes it in turn to speak for about 10 – 15 minutes on events or people that have influenced them or impacted upon their lives. Often accounts of the lives of others are used as examples in order to stimulate discussion.

We have been encouraged during the lockdown to note that, as each week has gone by, more folk feel confident enough to want to share their experiences and to discuss topics and influences that have affected them spiritually. Our small group has grown during the lockdown!

Geoff Harris



Lent Climate Group

I recently read an article on climate change which stated that some scientists knew of the issue back in the 70s but decided not to make it public until ten years later because of the financial impact it would have on some of major energy companies. It turns out that for ten years they pumped out misinformation to cast doubt until the real facts came to the surface in the 80s. At the same time, we as the public have also refused to acknowledge climate change. We have tuned out of the warnings because they have become so confusing. We think: 'I have too much on my plate already' or 'The earth is a big place; how can one person make a difference?'

Fifty years later and we are facing a real crisis. We cannot ignore the prospect that the environment is being seriously harmed by our industrial and consumer way of life. As Christians it would be morally irresponsible if we failed to acknowledge the issue and the need for urgent action. It therefore felt only right that this year during Lent we should bring this important issue to the forefront of people's minds. We set up our Lent Study to help us reflect theologically on the scientific information we have, to explore what the Bible has to say about environmental concerns, and to be aware that God expects us to act as good stewards of his creation. My overall hope was that studying

and reading the Bible in the context of climate change would help to provide a deeper understanding of the call to 'practise love and justice to our human and non-human neighbours.'

Our Lent study started each week with teaching videos put together by several local preachers and the Third Avenue worship group. This was followed by a Zoom study on Monday evenings to explore biblical answers to some of the important environmental issues that our planet is facing. To enrich the study, we drew on a variety of different sources but mainly focused on two booklets, *Tenants of the King* and *God's World*.

What have we learnt?

- Psalm 24 reminds us, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." We are called by God to treasure and care for the earth. When we care for creation, we are showing that we value what belongs to God.
- We are only now coming to recognise the many ways our industrial/consumer society is harming the earth and its people.
- Genesis tells us that we are to take care of both the living and the non-living creation. We are to work at ruling and ordering creation as good stewards without abusing it for our own selfish ends. By caring for the earth properly, we enable it to be fruitful and to play its intended role in giving glory to God.

- Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour as ourselves. Harm to the earth brings harm to people, and we are responsible for each other's well-being. God requires that we deal justly with one another. Environmental harm falls most heavily on the poor and will fall even more heavily on those yet to be born. Therefore, we have a responsibility to act and not ignore the issue. This won't happen unless we all resolve to act together, in our personal lives, in our local communities, and in the global community.

- We need to help our congregations to grow in knowledge and to encourage them to campaign at a local and national level for policies that strengthen and take steps towards tackling the environmental crisis that we are facing. We are also called to pray for those in power that they may fulfil the tasks God has given to them.

On a personal level, these resources have helped me to further understand the problem and the impact of climate change on this planet and what I can do to help. Coming together as a group was a blessing; on average we had about 20 people across the circuit join us each week. The online format meant we reached many more than if the study was face to face – a plus side! My hope is that this study will provoke us into transformative action – into a different way of living that will help us to 'recover our human calling under God as bearers of God's image in responsible care for God's creation.'

Robin Selmes



Discerning the right path

Reflections on closing Crayford Methodist Church

It was not as traumatic as you might think, closing a church building – well, not ours anyway. It was certainly no beauty, being only just set back a pace from the High Street. There was no parking outside and just as soon as you entered the building you were almost up to the altar rail! It was not a good church for a white wedding, as there was no length for the bride and her train to slowly process up the aisle. But we did have a thunderous organ, lovingly played week by week, and we did enjoy singing. We had a host of rooms to use, some large, some small and some just right. These included two large halls, the upstairs being used throughout by our own playgroup, overseen by the church council and very popular with the town's young parents.

So why did we close? You could argue that we had sufficient members, and they were not all elderly. We had enough money to fund our assessment and a tidy sum in reserve. We reached out to the community through our very popular book stall and coffee mornings. We had a toddler group, bible study and house groups. We supported the Circuit and joined in with its social gatherings.

However, we knew our building was basically flawed. It was 1950s built, and although we looked after it as best we could, it needed a lot of attention to get it up to health and safety standards, especially with regard to disabled access and the multitude of regulations concerning electrical safety. We knew it was only a matter of time before someone plugged in a device and either the whole place would either go up in flames or the person would be electrocuted. We could not in good conscience continue to allow the building to be used.



At a church council meeting in February 2006 we discussed our future. Although we prayed and reflected and listened to the leadings of the Spirit, those on church council knew what our future was. When we decided to pursue a policy of closure no one argued against it. In fact, what we felt was relief. Sadness, yes of course, but in our hearts we knew it was what God wanted; to free us from the yoke of building responsibility which no one had the skills for. Closure resulted in an outpouring of many resources, both human and monetary. That is the legacy I am strongly convinced was ours to give. People could now be free to follow what the Spirit enabled.

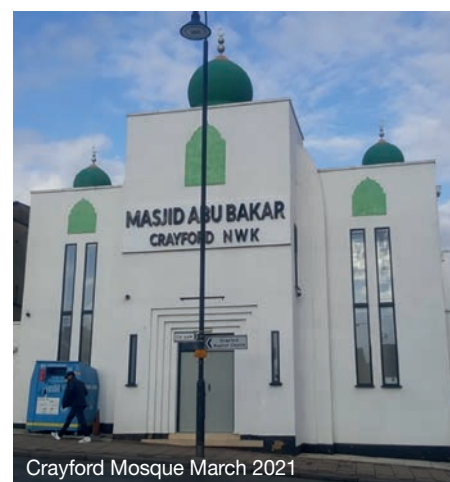
I took our decision to the next Circuit Meeting, asking permission for us to close. I spoke to that meeting, explaining why we had made the decision. Convinced in my mind that this was God's will, not ours, made the speech easier. Others from around the circuit were saddened but agreed too. We duly had our last Sunday service on the 8 October 2006.

In early 2007 our building was sold at auction to the North West Kent Muslim Association, as they were the highest bidders. Perhaps that is not what most would have preferred, but it is what happened, and afterwards I was known as the woman who sold a church to the Muslims!

Crayford Methodist Church was not the inadequate building we sold, but it was the people who frequented it throughout many years. A building has memories, but they are not in the building, they are in our hearts. Those members who see that building today do not think of what we have lost, but what it has enabled us to do. Members took different paths. It enabled me to study to become a Local Preacher and now a circuit steward.

Not every church's path will be the same. Some will hear that still small voice encouraging continuation despite setbacks. Others will greet new members with fresh energies and visions. What no church must do is to limp on doing the same thing in the same way. Open up your hearts and minds to possibilities. Listen to the leadings of the Spirit in your heart, pray and wait for his response and then discuss with your own folk and with the Circuit. Closure of a building is not closure of Christ's Kingdom in that community; it can be a refreshing downpour of new resources to be used in a new setting. I am sure that this was the case for Crayford Methodist Church and I rejoice in the opportunities closure brought.

Gill Gray





When my church closed



Here's the thing: church closure sucks. There, I've said it. 'Traumatic' is not too strong a word to describe the closure of your church and if you haven't been through it, I don't think you can understand fully. It's true, there was a certain element of relief when the decision was finally made to close, but still there is sadness and bereavement. With the opening-up of the churches just around the corner, we look forward to meeting up, worshipping together and singing, but unfortunately there may be some churches that don't re-open. I'd wanted to give you an uplifting 'life goes on' piece, but that would be to trivialise the whole sorry process, inevitable though it was.

I went to Sutton-at-Hone Methodist Church from about the age of eight when my friends lured me over from the C of E Sunday School because the Methodist one was more fun. (I know, right?) When we were teenagers, we attended Methodist Association of Youth Clubs (MAYC) events; I was hungover at Sutton and forgiven at Sutton. I was confirmed at Sutton, married at Sutton, and my children were baptised in the font at Sutton. My faith was nurtured at Sutton. We were a pretty vibrant church in our way, with Bible study groups, classical music concerts and Christmas plays. Our organist was quietly brilliant.

So, what happened? I'm sure it's a familiar story in many rural churches – my friends and I all went off to university, but I was the only one who came back again. My son and daughter were the only children in church; the Sunday School was no longer. We tried hard, really hard, to reach out. We hosted holiday clubs, we welcomed a Seed Team, we offered a different style of service, we wore out our shoe leather walking the villages putting leaflets through doors, talking to people on their drives. They were very polite and thought the shorter service was a great idea. But they didn't come. I made piles of Fortune Cookies with lines from the Psalms enclosed, and we gave them away at the local fete. We had conversations with people. However, it became clear that we couldn't manage – the congregation was elderly, the administration was baffling, the outreach was not reaching. Keeping the church open was not in God's plan.

After heartfelt prayer and lots of difficult decision-making, the church shut in 2018 after 180 years of serving God in Sutton-at-Hone. In that time there were many people who came to know Jesus as their Saviour, including me, now a Local Preacher. I can rejoice at the happy memories I have of the church and the people I met who have shaped my life. After much thought and prayer,

I settled at Spital Street and I've had nothing but care and support. I've felt really welcome and I thank the members for their love and kindness. It's still hard though, to walk past our dear old church building in Sutton and see the garden straggly with weeds and know that moths are eating the Sunday School carpet unhindered.

If there's one piece of advice I would give to other churches, it would be to make sure you change your *Church Council Stewards and officers* regularly starting right now. You need the voices and ideas of diverse people in order for the church to move forwards. And the outgoing stewards need to graciously step back and offer advice only when asked, otherwise the new people are intimidated and nothing changes.

Please contact me if you need practical advice or indeed someone to rant at and cry with; I can understand because I've been through it. *Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris* (Misery loves company). However, I am also, as it turns out, able to say that life does indeed go on and I would be glad to walk that path with you.

Tracey Burch

Small but Richly Blessed

Hartlip Methodist Church and Retreat Centre

You will find Hartlip Methodist Church at the end of The Street in the picturesque village of Hartlip, situated between Sittingbourne and Rainham. The foundation stone was laid in 1820 and worship commenced in June 1821, so this year we are looking forward to celebrating our 200th anniversary. The chapel was originally known as Cardiphonia Chapel and this name is on the foundation stone above the entrance porch. In 1907 the schoolroom was added to the rear of the chapel, and so there has been a Methodist presence in the village for many years where the Gospel has been faithfully proclaimed.

The membership has fluctuated over the years and in the late 90s was as low as nine. At that time, the members still believed that this small chapel could be used by God and so, in faith, the Church Council agreed to raise money, seek grants and upgrade the chapel and completely transform the

schoolroom into a day retreat centre. The garden on one side of the chapel enhanced the Retreat Centre by providing a place of tranquillity where people could rest awhile and appreciate the sounds and sights of nature. During the past 20 years, many hundreds of people have used the Retreat Centre to find inspiration, peace, rest, and indeed the presence of Christ himself.

Although today the membership is 23, we are a small church and yet a vibrant one.

Worship is held weekly on Sunday evenings and this evening slot has many benefits since more preachers are available then. Our range of preachers is wide and varied and in fact includes four Local Preachers from our own congregation, all of whom help with worship along with three organists from our membership. We often have visitors from the village and the Circuit, especially during the summer months. We celebrate the Festivals, and our

Harvest Festival and Christmas Candle and Fairylight Carol Services when the church is decorated are something to behold.

As a small community, we are like one big family caring for one another and this has been especially true during the lockdown since Hartlip closed its doors to in-person worship on 15 March 2020. We know how important it is to communicate regularly with each other so that everyone feels a sense of belonging. Besides the circuit live-streamed services on Sunday mornings, Hartlip has had its own service sent out to everyone either by e-mail or post. At 6.30 pm each Sunday we have shared together in this service and thought of all our members, calling them to mind by name. In addition, we usually meet socially during the course of the year going to the Pantomime at The Marlowe and enjoying fish and chip suppers with entertainment.

Unlike most churches, Hartlip does not have any lettings to raise money. When folk use the Retreat Centre, often a donation is received towards the running costs. Two fundraising events are held yearly, namely a Spring Tea and our famous Strawberry Tea, when the whole of the premises and garden are crammed with visitors. Hartlip is renowned for its teas! To maintain our church and pay our expenses, including our Circuit Assessment, we rely on the generosity of our folk in giving in our weekly collections.

'To give is to receive!' Even though we are small in number, we are richly blessed pastorally, financially and spiritually.

Please join us for our 200 Celebration Service to be live streamed on Sunday 13 June when the preacher will be the Revd Michaela Youngson, Ex-President of the Methodist Conference.

Brian Davies

For the next issue:

Please send contributions as a Word document, no longer than 500 words, to bonni-belle.pickard@methodist.org.uk to arrive by 20 June 2021. If you can, please attach a suitable high quality image, but do not embed it in a document.

