



## **Do you have a plan for your church to grow: in worship, in faith, in service, in numbers?**

You may have heard that the Methodist Conference 2017 has asked us to check, each year, that we have a plan for growth in place.

The Methodist Conference 2017 “with immediate effect encourages every Church Council annually to address and answer the question ‘do you have a growth plan or an end of life plan?’ and to present their answer to the Circuit Meeting in order to aid their wider, strategic oversight of mission and ministry”. “Should a local church offer no growth plan (within two years) they should be strongly encouraged and supported as they consider their end of life plan”.

This sounds dramatic but it’s a healthy way of living life in all its fullness... whatever that means in our own situation. It is a way of planning for the growth that God wants for us, whether that be growth in faith, numbers, witness, friendship or other growth (and often different types of growth feed into each other), or of being honest about how to face the end of this particular church healthily in the light of the resurrection hope we all share.

Around the district I see churches doing this work of review and planning all the time and I’m confident that we can use this Conference decision to help us reflect on what God wants for us and our communities, and to develop healthy practices with the churches we serve. It is only local people who can work out what will work best but there is support available.

Here are some suggestions that may help with putting this Conference decision into practice. While these ideas are not ‘off the peg’ short-cuts for the prayer and conversation that needs to be done, they are thoughts about tackling the process, and options to help you develop your own growth plans. They can, of course, be ignored if you have other ways of doing this, but I hope we can use the Conference decision to encourage churches in their life, whatever stage of life they may currently be at.

### **Help with the Growth Plan process:**

1. Pray. Maybe write a prayer for you all to use together and at home? Use it every week on a Sunday? Hold a prayer event? Talk honestly about what you have thought or heard in your prayers, whenever and wherever you can, but also at church.
2. Reduce the number of ‘traditional’ services in order to give yourselves more of a rest, while you focus on this review time. This could be done as part of a Local Arrangements (LA) service.
3. ‘Get out there’ beyond the church and talk together about what you find out. Commit to going together into your area somehow. Who is around you? Where do they go and what is their life like? Ask God who God might want you to be engaging

with? Where would Jesus be and what would he think/say about what he sees around you?

4. Involve your house-bound members in the process as far as possible.
5. Have honest conversations about what you know and hear and how it makes you feel and how you want to respond and why.

### **Growth Plan possibilities**

- Commit to a regular prayer walk (or car ride) together, around your area, while you ask God 'what next?'
- Listen to any young people connected with your church about how they see the church's life and potential (their views are no more important than others, but are often less heard)
- Hold a 'Newcomers meal' every so often (but regularly and advertised all the time, "Our next Newcomers dinner will be....")
- Open a prayer room, or begin a regular 24/7 prayer station
- Talk with young adults about what they need locally or what they might offer
- Discern who might volunteer, or be paid, as a worker who will lead and support you in developing a new piece of work
- Ask for some evangelism training... calling it whatever works for you!
- Meet for Bible Study in a public building and invite friends to join in so that you have a 'real-life' perspective on what you're reading together
- Begin an orchestra or band (however small) for some variety in worship music, asking others locally from beyond the current church to join in perhaps
- Develop a team around somebody who God is calling to be a pioneer with the Methodist Church (working with new communities or groups of people)
- Ask for some training in doing some aspect of your life differently
- Begin a new ecclesial community in an existing chapel/ a local centre/a community of people (see, for example, 'Forest Church' which always meets outdoors, 'Singing Church', 'Dinner Church', or 'Walking Church' which all do what they say!)
- Investigate Anna Chaplaincy or dementia-cafe
- Open an 'honesty shop' or some other new response to your community
- Consider 'Messy Church' as your church of the future and spend your energy strengthening that congregation and its leadership, until it is a 'new church'
- Invest in music lessons, and instruments, for people to learn and contribute to worship
- Stop all the activities which are declining and start a new mission activity together
- Try prayer outside your building in some way
- Ask for training for some of your members to be 'mentors' to those who are new to faith or seeking to know more
- Engage with those people using your building already to help them grow in faith, and challenge your own faith as you do that... aim for 10% growth in membership this next year (there is a training session available for this if you'd like it)
- Any of the ideas that God has already given you!!

### **Help with the End of Life Care Plan process:**

If you feel that your church's life is coming to an end, then that is OK. We share a belief that there is always life beyond death and we know that all earthly life, individual and collective, comes to an end at some point, to make way for what lies after it. Here are some ideas, again to use or ignore or adapt as appropriate:

1. Pray. Maybe write a prayer for you all to use together and at home? Use it every week on a Sunday? Hold a prayer event? Talk honestly about what you have thought or heard in your prayers, whenever and wherever you can, but also at church.
2. Reduce the number of 'traditional' services in order to give yourselves more of a rest, while you focus on this review time. This could be done as part of a Local Arrangements (LA) service.
3. Consider what you would do beyond the 'end of life' of this particular chapel, however painful that might feel. It might not happen (God sometimes has other plans) but it is good to be honest about current reality.
4. Talk with each other openly about the situation you are in as a church and how you feel about it. Consider what you really want to happen next, in an ideal world, so that you can aim for it.
5. Talk with the minister and other staff about what support might be available for putting your 'end of life care' plan into place

### **End of Life Care Plan possibilities:**

- Have a building valuation done on the chapel itself so that you know what assets you can 'bequeath' to the circuit for them to use for the future mission
- Appoint one person, from beyond the church, who is willing to talk separately with all those involved (if this is possible) and to find out what they think. (One church discovered that all the church members felt that the time had come for the church to close, but none of them wanted to be the one that voiced it, out of consideration for the others.)
- Talk together about good ways of remembering the life of this church... for example who could be given what?
- Think about writing up some memories of what you'd like to be remembered, and even creating a small book with photos... this is easily done now... ask for help if you need it.

- Make a 'memory book' or 'memory box' that could be kept in a new church, including written or video/audio recorded memories so that nothing is unnecessarily lost<sup>1</sup>
- Talk with the district archivist about where to take your documents and official records of the church's life
- Think and pray about whether there are others who might want to use your building for other purposes which Methodists would rejoice over.
- Change to a midweek worship occasion (this might help your minister and preachers to be in touch more regularly as you close)
- Become a 'mission' to a different part of the community
- Make a map of where your current attenders live and ask them to decide which church they would like to attend afterwards, to see if 'groups' or 'pairs' could go together for mutual support
- Hold a celebration of your church's life, and recognize all that has been good in the past and present
- Continue, or begin, a 'prayer on the street' ministry at the market place/shopping centre
- When you reach X number of worshippers per week give the circuit the option of selling the building to use the money for mission
- Decide where the beloved 'treasures' of your church building would find new homes
- Visit each person connected with the church to learn how they would like to mark the ending of the church's life
- Continue to meet for fellowship on a Sunday/ weekday, but in a home, other church building, café or garden centre
- Use 'Our Calling' to consider how you need to care for the worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism aspects of your church as you move towards closing.
- Ask to be part of another church's life, continuing as a 'class meeting'

The key thing is to be asking God's guidance on what God is asking of us, and then to have a go at doing and living it. There will be some more resources from the Connexion by Conference, but in the meantime please feel free to get started!

I firmly believe that most churches have their own sense of what God is asking of them, and this process is about getting that agreed together. This means we can then check whether what we're doing is working and, if not, we can make changes accordingly, with the aims of the church firmly in sight. We are not called to keep going for the sake of it, but to help people come to faith in Christ and to actively serve the world God loves. Praise be to God!

Feel free to email for support with any of these suggestions above once you are ready to explore if they would work for you.... [jill.marsh@methodist.org.uk](mailto:jill.marsh@methodist.org.uk)

Thanks for all you do locally, Jill Marsh (District Director of Mission)

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<sup>1</sup> There are various requirements for archiving the 'heritage' of your church if you do decide to close a building, and the district Archivist, Roy Slocombe, would be able to advise on this.