

For such a time as this... being church in a post Christendom liminal season

The District staff team held an away day in February. We focussed on some of the trends we see emerging across our work supporting circuits, churches and individuals, and what these tell us about how we should be responding. We felt it would be helpful to hear the perspective of DLT on these matters.

Liminal ages begin with an ending. The former ways of working no longer function. Activities end. Order collapses. But a new consensus vision, norms of behaviour and fresh operating model have not yet emerged. The liminal age is a wilderness season: beyond the stable drudgery subjection to pharaoh but with land of milk and honey still over the horizon.

Recognising liminality

At our District Mission Forum in 2018, we reviewed a range of statistics about the scale and shape of Methodism across our district. We began our away day by revisiting some of these, where data continues to be available. This makes clear the ending of an era:

- **Membership continues to fall** – total membership across the district fell from 7,300 in 2012, to 5,900 in 2017 and then to 4,600 in 2021
- **Number of chapels is reducing** – between 2012 to 2017 we closed 16 chapel buildings. A further 28 have closed since. We currently have 133.
- **Ministers & pastors just as thinly spread** – our ministers/ lay pastors today have oversight of an average of 3.3 chapels (although models of deploying ministry vary considerably between circuits). This is unchanged since 2018, meaning that closing chapels is not giving us opportunity to for concentrated ministry. In 2018 we did note that our worship attendance was concentrated into a few larger churches (one third of worship attendance was in just 15 churches of 100+ attendees). It is not clear whether this pattern continues
- **Budgets are not balancing** – all of our circuits are running significant deficits. Excluding proceeds from property sales our circuits will run a combined underlying deficit of over £1m this year.
- **Employed lay ministry is being maintained** – whilst some of the roles have changed, total levels of employed lay ministry have held up since 2018, and is now larger than ordained ministry. We have 29 FTE outreach/missional roles and 16 FTE administrative/ supporting roles.

There are however reasons to be hopeful about our future:

- **New members are being confirmed** – having dropped significantly during COVID lockdowns, numbers of new Christians being confirmed into membership are starting to recover, up to 50 during 2021/22.
- **New Christian communities are growing** – we have ten new Christian communities within the district that have reached the developmental stage of new people gathering regularly for worship or to explore Christian faith, with more at an earlier stage or being envisioned.
- **Stories worth sharing** – we could readily identify communities within the district pointing to a hopeful future, such as:
 - Family Fun Church, Rotherham - Stepping outside of existing congregational moulds with scattered families to create a fresh circuit-led congregation centred around the

needs of families with young children at the times that work for them has created a church that new families are joining. Having spread to a second location and time it could potentially become multisite in other places too.

- Gleadless Valley, Sheffield - This estate church could easily have been closed as its membership dwindled, but members of the circuit leadership took time and had the insight to hear locally owned visions and recognise latent skills. This has then been backed up by the circuit investing ministerial time in presence ministry to restart the church in partnership with the food bank.
- Victoria Hall, Sheffield - growing town centre outreach, particularly amongst marginalised people, and the role of active partnership with other churches underpinning this. It also speaks to finding entrepreneurial ways of funding ministry. Both the building management and missional elements benefited from implementation of thorough external reviews.
- Barnsley Circuit - Taking time to collectively discern and hold to distinctive multisite church and circuit vision is now enabling bold visions such as the new manse and deacon in Barough to begin to be realised.

Expected behaviours

In this chrysalistic inbetween state, Susan Beaumont¹ suggests we should expect the following behaviours:

- **Anxiety rises; motivation falls.** People question their attachment to the organisation or the cause. They wonder if they want to continue the relationship
- **Attendance drops off.** Some people stop attending altogether, planning to take a break until the liminal season is over. Others attend but with less frequency, deciding that this is a good time to pull back, wait to see what emerges next. The detachment of some places additional stress on others who find they must pick up the slack of those taking a breather.
- **Old weaknesses,** long patched over or compensated for re-emerge in full bloom. Old conflict issues re-emerge.
- **Personnel are overloaded.** Signals about what is important are mixed, and systems are in flux and therefore unreliable. It takes more effort to accomplish everything, even the most mundane daily tasks.
- People in the organisation are **easily polarised** between those who want to rush forward into the new thing and those who long to return to the old familiar ways.

She argues that the primary leadership task is to “normalise the experience and to frame/define the season as acceptable and even desirable”

Does this feel familiar? Is it helpful to name and own this context?

How to respond

Beaumont suggests the key liminal season leadership priorities should be:

¹ Susan Beaumont, *How to lead when you don't know where you're going*, p12

- **Deepening group discernment** – transactional management and problem solving alone can't deliver what we need. Neither can a plan created and imposed by a single individual
- **Shaping institutional memory** – retelling authentic testimonies of our collective story so far, giving pastoral space for grief, surrendering and letting go before we can think about the future. Care needs to be taken in the framing of these stories and the messages they reinforce.
- **Clarifying purpose** – Who do we chose to be? Who are we for? What values define us? What do we need to do next? We will need to build the bridge between the old and the new, plank by plank, even as we walk across it
- **Engaging with emergence** – asking “are we there yet?” Encouraging as much disruption and purposeful innovation as can be coped with. Being alert to green shoots and false dawns – expecting a murmuration when the season turns.

As leaders, how much time do we spend doing these? Is there anything else which feels more important?

Setting a compass

In this fog-bound liminal season, a compass feels more helpful than a map. We explored what we hope to see in 2033, that we should encourage movement towards; and what we fear.

Fears	Hopes
Still in the wilderness, lacking vision As we are but smaller	More/ new Christian communities Church re-imagined in different ways which collectively make space for a broad spread of people Fewer buildings Majority of people in our churches are new since 2023
No structure within churches to facilitate prayer	Hope and joy
Lack of collaborative leadership Few people attempting to do everything Disintegration of governance	Greater sense of organic lay-led movement Energised leaders
	Whole community/ neighbourhood transformation
Lack of connection and shared identity between scattered churches	Joined up working between churches pursuing similar projects

Immediate actions we (as district) could take to encourage helpful liminal behaviours include:

- **Voicing liminality** - creating opportunities to talk widely of liminality, expected behaviours and potential responses to give people a framework to understand what is happening to them
- **Sharing stories** – encourage purposeful experimentation, pose the question “who can we chose to be”

- **Protecting green shoots** – be alert to the pressures on group discerned innovation and potential. Spot patterns between what is flourishing in different places. We may need to be creative with our structures to give these time and space to coalesce?
- **Identifying values** – is “learning, changing, joining in” still the right language to describe what district is for?
- **Creating capacity** – what more can we do to give lay and ordained leaders at circuit/church/congregation level the time, space and expertise to flourish in this liminal era?

What language do you use to articulate our liminal compass bearings? What can we do to encourage good responses for such a liminal time as this?

CIRCUITS	Attendance - weekly				Attendance - Sunday		Methodist members			Chapels			2022/23 finances (£'000)			
	2012	2017	2012	2017	2012	2017	2021	2012	2017	2021	opening cash	income	spend	deficit		
Sheffield	3,274	2,612	2,897	2,334	2,985	2,364	1,569	64	57	50	1,279	1,027	1,518	-491		
Derbyshire North East	943	975	729	713	853	735	635	20	19	15	580	346	535	-189		
The Peak	294	289	294	255	399	219	260	13	13	12	215	131	189	-58		
Doncaster	1,095	935	934	789	955	823	674	22	22	19						
Barnsley	1,197	908	870	749	857	712	600	26	23	17	860	292	379	-87		
Rotherham and Dearne Valley	1,065	813	830	660	777	660	460	18	14	9						
Trinity	670	621	537	398	513	434	367	16	15	11	173	154	266	-112		
Total District	8,538	7,151	7,091	5,896	7,339	5,947	4,565	177	161	133	3,107	1,950	2,887	-937		
2018	Ordained ministers (headcount)						Lay employees (FTE)				excludes proceeds from property sales					
	Methodist	Ecumenical	pastors	Lay Members each	Chapels each		Children & youth ministry	Other Admin & support								
Sheffield	16	3	1	118	2.9		6.6	3.1	8.5							
Derbyshire North East	5	2		105	2.7		1.0	1.0	0.5							
The Peak	2	1		73	4.3		0.5	0.0	0.0							
Doncaster	4	0	1.5	150	4.0		2.0	2.3	0.4							
Barnsley	5	0		142	4.6		1.3	1.3	1.4							
Rotherham and Dearne Valley	2	2	0.8	138	2.9		4.0	0.0	2.5							
Trinity	3	2		87	3.0		0.0	0.5	0.8							
District staff	2	0					0.0	1.6	2.2							
Total District	39	10	3.3	121	3.3		15.3	9.7	16.4							
Feb-23	Ministers & lay pastors (FTE)						Lay employees (FTE)									
	Methodist	Ecumenical	pastors	Lay Members each	Chapels each		Children & youth ministry	Other Admin & support	Excludes							
Sheffield	15.3	3.0	0.4	84	2.7		5.1	5.3	5.3	The Foundry, Victoria Community Enterprises						
Derbyshire North East	5.0	1.0	0.0	106	2.5		1.1	1.3	1.5							
The Peak	2.0	0.0	0.0	130	6.0		0.5	0.6	0.5							
Doncaster	2.0	0.0	2.3	156	4.4		1.1	1.0	1.0							
Barnsley	4.0	0.0	0.0	150	4.3		2.9	2.6	1.0							
Rotherham and Dearne Valley	0.4	1.0	1.0	193	3.8		4.5	1.1	0.8	High Street Centre						
Trinity	3.0	1.0	0.0	92	2.8		0.0	0.0	1.6							
District staff	2.0	0.0	0.0				1.0	1.0	3.9							
Total District	33.7	6.0	3.7	115	3.3		16.2	12.8	15.6							
Lay employees excludes cleaners, caretakers & organists																
Ordained ministers includes probationers																

Church	Circuit	Confirmations 2013-2017	Church	Circuit	Confirmations 2018-2021
TKCC, Hexthorpe	Doncaster	21	MC Barnsley South	Barnsley	14
Totley Rise	Sheffield	21	Greenhill	Sheffield	11
St John's Swinton	Rotherham & DV	21	South Anston	Trinity	11
Emmanuel	Barnsley	20	Bolsover	Derbyshire North East	9
Central Chesterfield	Chesterfield	19	TKCC, Hexthorpe	Doncaster	9
Greenhill	Sheffield	16	Tickhill	Doncaster	8
Eastwood Mission	Rotherham & DV	15	Barnby Dun	Doncaster	7
Central Aston Cum Aughton	Rotherham & DV	12	MC Barnsley North East	Barnsley	7
Stocksbridge	Sheffield	11	Central Chesterfield	Derbyshire North East	6
Broom	Rotherham & DV	10	St John's Swinton	Rotherham & DV	6
Wickersley	Rotherham & DV	9	Bents Green	Sheffield	4
The Crossing	Trinity	9	Cantley	Doncaster	4
Bents Green	Sheffield	8	Central Aston Cum Aughton	Rotherham & DV	4
Wisewood	Sheffield	8	Sprotbrough Road	Doncaster	4
Bolsover	Derbyshire North East	7	Staveley	Derbyshire North East	4
Milhouses	Sheffield	7	Totley Rise	Sheffield	4
Bakewell	The Peak	7	Walkley Ebenezer	Sheffield	4
High Green	Sheffield	7	46 other churches		78
The Church of Christ in Darnall	Sheffield	7	Total		194
Auckley	Doncaster	7	% membership confirmed in last 4 years		4.2%
72 other churches		183			
Total		425		2018 total	77
% membership confirmed in last 5 years		7.1%		2019 total	71
				2020 total (covid)	22
average per year		85		2021 total (covid)	24
				2022 provisional total	50