

## Mission and Evangelism

in the East Anglia District

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### A. Naming the Problem

Over the years that I have worked within, and travelled about, our District, I have become more and more concerned about whether our churches, and Circuits, are 'Gateways to God' or merely 'Maps to Methodism'.

By 'Gateways to God' I mean places where those who are unaccustomed to formal worship might be able to experience something of God: true holiness, a sense of the sacred, God's love and mercy, mystery and wonder.

By 'Maps to Methodism' I mean terminology that is peculiarly Methodist (but which has no currency outside Methodism: 'CPD', 'the plan', 'circuits', 'presbyters,' etc.). I am not suggesting that Methodism cannot be a Gateway to God, but more often than not, our churches - people, buildings and services - speak more of denominationalism than of a universal God.

Nearly any Christian research today will tell you that the vast majority of people who visit our churches are not seeking a *denomination*, they are seeking after God. The average seeker is not interested in our "Constitutional Practice and Discipline" or the history of Methodism: they are seeking to nourish their spiritual hunger. Questions about what makes a particular church 'Methodist' will come later.

The first thing a seeker needs to know is that he or she is welcome and that his or her questions will not only be tolerated, but accepted. As Paul said to the Athenians:

"The God who made the world and everything in it... [made humanity] that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him."

*(Acts 17: 24a, 27)*

This was something that was paramount in the movement that was begun by John and Charles Wesley. Through words spoken, written and sung, they helped both to revitalise an Anglican Church which had lost much of its inner vigour and to reach out to the unchurched masses. Now, some 270 years later, Methodism finds itself in quite the same situation as John Wesley found the Church of England in the 1730s. In short, the Methodist Church in Great Britain has itself become an 'institution': 'Church Inc.'. Thus for all too many God-seekers, it has become a pathway to itself.

Where are the communities founded on 'scriptural holiness' and pointing towards the transforming God who "works in the heart through faith in Christ"?

# Gateways to God?

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## Warmed heart ≠ sentimentalism

It was this saving, forgiving love of God in Christ that caused John Wesley's heart to be "strangely warmed" and which brought about his Christian renewal. However, we need to be clear that Wesley's "warmed heart" was no mere sentimentalism. And yet, sentimentalism pervades Methodism today:

"Our churches used to be full..."

"We had a wonderful youth group..."

"Old Mother Hubbard was married in this church..."

"My grandfather gave that pulpit..."

It is such sentimentalism that keeps us firmly anchored in the past and in our comfort zones, rather than venturing out in faith to engage the world - God's world - around us. Our sentimentalism will not save us, it will not save our decaying buildings and it will not attract anyone to the love of God, because personal sentiments cannot be shared with others - they remain our own.

## B. Towards a Solution: Church and Circuit Audits

The idea of this audit is to use discussion groups to work through and answer the numbered questions. The scriptures and questions you will find here are not meant to be exhaustive; rather they are offered as starting points to assess the mission and outreach of your church. For Circuit use, there is an additional page at the end of the document.

### A Fruitful Vine

Jesus used a simple organic image for the Christian life and calling.

Read John 15:1-17 and use it to gauge your Church's current health and willingness to tend its part of the Master's vineyard.

Any gardener will know that a branch of a vine doesn't usually die at once. Its fruit or leaves tend to die gradually. However, the vine's life-sustaining sap still flows into the dying branch, therefore diminishing the fruit yielded by the healthier branches. This example holds for the Church as well, but we often fail to take the decisive action of the gardener.

1. Why do you think that Jesus compared the life of his followers to a vine and its branches? What *purpose* does Jesus see for the branches?

### C. Who Are We?

#### Do we know who we are as a church community?

2. Can we describe our faith to others? Are we willing to do so or are we afraid? If we are afraid, can we name our fears?

Knowing who we are will determine the course of our actions and fruit we yield.

#### Who are we from the outsider's point of view?

3. Do we have leaflets, booklets or other material which briefly explain the basics of Christian faith?

#### If our churches were businesses, would people know what our product is?

4. Do we know what our product is? Are we selling Jesus - and all that comes with him - or are we simply marketing 'Church, Inc.'?

5. Are our Welcome Stewards informed enough about the above concerns to be of help to seekers, or would they have to refer the person to 'the minister'?

6. Are there 2-3 members who would be willing to form a nurturing group - who would meet, discuss and pray with new seekers?

7. Are we helping people on their pathway to God or are we colonising them with *our* ways and *our* experiences?

### D. Our Worship:

Where is the 'wow factor' in our worship and life? For a biblical understanding of 'wow factor' see

Genesis 28:10-17

Psalm 8

1 Kings 19:9-13

Isaiah 6:1-8

Acts 9:1-9.

8. When and where in the life of our church might people experience both the 'wholly otherness' and 'holy otherness' of God?

9. The Bible makes it clear that we do not encounter God and come away just as we were before - it always entails a change within us. Are we more interested in the comfort zone of repetitive worship or are we willing to expand our repertoire and explore other styles of worship?

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What do you see?



Can you remember the first time you saw this puzzle-word? (And if you have never seen it before - what does it look like at first?) At first it looks like a random assemblage of bits of wood. It takes time for our mind to make sense of what our eyes perceive, but once we see the name - Jesus - we can never *not* see it again! It will always say 'Jesus' to us. Do our worship, buildings and activities say 'Jesus'?

We want people to come into our churches - but what will they see? What will they hear? Will the words we say and the hymns we sing, seem as foreign to them as the bits of wood in the Jesus-puzzle? Would God-seekers discover a community of people living faithfully? Would they find loving hearts? Or would they find more of the same thing they could encounter outside the church (arguments, dissension, spitefulness, etc.), but dressed up in 'holy' garb?

Thus, with the above Jesus-puzzle in mind, we need to ask:

10. How transparent is our language - particularly in worship? In other words, how much unexplained jargon do we use that might be off-putting to a stranger?

11. How transparent is our worship? For instance: would unchurched people know when and why to stand or sit down? Would they know what to do at communion?

12. How transparent is our building? For instance: do we have furnishings, banners, religious objects, etc. that even our members might not understand? For example, I have found that most worshippers have no idea what IHS stands for - so why should a seeker? Perhaps we need explanatory sheets for our buildings and décor? [A good resource: *How to Read a Church*, by Richard Taylor (Rider & Co., 2007)]

## E. What Are We Doing?

**What should we be doing?** On the first Pentecost, after Peter had addressed the crowds, they asked him and the other apostles: "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter's first response was: "Repent". We might be tempted to ask: 'Why do we need to repent?'

## Gateways to God?

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We're already Christians!' Thus we need to look more closely at what this term 'repent' meant in the Bible.

In Greek, the language of the New Testament, *metanoia* means to have 'a fundamental change of mind', 'to have a new perspective (on life)'. This is what Paul means in Romans 12 when he adjures us to 'be transformed by the renewal of our minds'.

Similarly, in the Old Testament, the verb we translate as 'repent' is *shuv*, which literally means 'to turn around' - thus to change direction (morally and spiritually). We should never make the assumption that because we claim the name Christian, we can do what we like or that what we are currently doing is necessarily the will of God.

So the first thing we need to do is to ask where our current thinking has got us versus where we actually feel God wants us to go?

13. How often do we identify 'God's will' with our own desires?

14. Are people being brought to faith in God in Christ in our church?

15. Are we a community of people who have found reconciliation to God and one another? (Or do we have unresolved feuds and conflicts?)

16. Are we a church engaged with the local community or are we huddled safely behind closed doors?

### Missing the point?

If most of our time, money and effort are going into maintaining institutional Methodism and/or bricks and mortar, then we are missing the point of the Gospel calling. If we spend more time on matters that concern the institutional church than we do on people and our local community, then how might we change that?

**First**, we must learn the difference between mere *activity* and productivity.

**Second**, if our church is aiming at *nothing*, then it will hit it!: zero, zilch, nada, nothing. It is a sobering thought that the New Testament verb for 'to sin' (Greek: *hamartáno*) has the root meaning of 'to miss the mark'; it is like an archer aiming at a target and missing. However, it is better for the archer to aim and miss than to aim at nothing at all!

17. **What are our local church's aims and goals? What is our church's mission?** If we have none - other than to keep ticking over - then what does that say about the state of our relationship with Jesus and the goals he gave the church? (see Matthew 25:31-46; 28:18-20; John 15:12-17)

**Third**, have a look at Numbers 13:17-14:24.

## Gateways to God?

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God does not reward timidity. God placed the Promised Land before the Israelites and they could only see monsters! They preferred the wilderness - or even return to slavery in Egypt - over the leap of faith required to possess their inheritance.

18. What monsters are we perceiving that might prevent our trusting in God and going forward into new territory?

The title for the book of Numbers in the original Hebrew is “in the wilderness”. The root of the Hebrew word ‘wilderness’ is the same as that for ‘speech/speaking’. The Israelites’ time in the wilderness was also a time of God speaking to them. Their extended time in the wilderness was due to their not heeding what God had to say.

### F. Simple Suggestions

Starting points for engagement: Romans 12:1-2 and Acts 17:16-34. Read them and discuss them with others in your church.

19. What are they saying to us? How do they challenge us?

Creating a sense of awe and wonder: Sometimes we have to lose our mind and come to our senses! - using music, art, touch, taste, smell to help us engage the ‘numinous’. Don’t relegate God to a concept. Use everyday items (water, soil, plants, rocks, light) to enhance the experience of God’s presence.

### G. Resources

(Deliberately few! The main thing is to get *engaged* with our faith.)

*Time to Talk of God: Recovering Christian Conversation as a Way of Nurturing Discipleship*. This is a report of the Methodist Conference 2005 and deserves more attention and use than it has been given.

*Finding Sanctuary*, Abbot Christopher Jamison, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006. The best modern book on spirituality that I have read. “Before I could offer sanctuary, I had to find it,” writes Jamison. This applies to all of us. It is a marvellous gateway to issues of modern spirituality.

*How to Read a Church*, by Richard Taylor (Rider & Co., 2007).

District Development Enabler

Regional Training Officer

[www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk)

[www.eauk.org/squaremile](http://www.eauk.org/squaremile)

### **H. Over to You!**

Are there useful tools, exercises or resources that you have found to be of benefit for your church or circuit and that might be added to this audit? Are there aspects of this audit that are not particularly helpful? Are you willing to share your successes with others? If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', then please contact Jack Lawson on 01953 601964 or [jacknlawson@btopenworld.com](mailto:jacknlawson@btopenworld.com).

### **I. And Finally .....**

We hope you have found this Audit useful and challenging. After the discussions, you may feel that you would like to do something positive to make your church a more inviting Gateway to God. Perhaps there is a scheme you have been thinking about for some time but you need advice or finance to get it started. If so, there may be help available. If you go to the Application for District Support document, under the Development Enabler's page on the web-site, you will find a form similar to the above, but with additional questions and a request to give details about your proposed scheme. (Or for a hard copy, contact Jack Lawson.) Please fill in your ideas from what you have done above with the above audit, including the extra details, and send it to me. All schemes will be looked at carefully and help will be given wherever possible. Don't let this chance go!

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### Hard Questions for Circuits

**Why do we invest in failure?** When it is clear that a church has had no new members in years and the building is falling into disrepair, why put more precious resources into it? Even if they can meet their assessment, is a dying church how we would wish to advertise life in Christ?

Read John 15:1-17 and use it to gauge your Circuit's willingness to tend its part of the master's vineyard.

1. Where could judicious pruning *now* increase growth in the future?

**Action in waiting:** In Matthew's Gospel, before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus tells his followers a series of parables regarding the kingdom of God. One of these is the parable of the 'talents'.

Read and discuss Matthew 25:14-30.

A 'talent' was a weight of measure - often in silver - which amounted to what a labourer would earn in 15 years of work at that time. You will recall that the master calls his servants together before he departs on a long journey, entrusting each of the servants with a large sum of money. The money is meant to be invested so that the master's money will have grown in value when he returns. You will also recall that one servant simply buried the talent entrusted to him: he chose to leave things as they were... "let the other servants worry about investing the master's money." Of course, when this servant goes to face his master, he is condemned for his slothfulness. The money was not *his* simply to do with as he pleased. It was held in trust for the master.

If we imagine ourselves in the position of the slothful servant when his master returned, how would we really feel offering him a cold, damp, mildewed building, that only opened its doors for one hour a week as our investment in his service, our contribution to God's kingdom? The church and its fruit are not ours but God's.

2. In what ways can we remind ourselves for whom we labour?

3. How can we create a sense of ownership for the mission and ministry of the entire Circuit? As opposed to guarding jealously of each church's or section's resources.

**Self-reflection:** What practices are we hanging on to that block the possibility of change?