

## **Darlington Methodist Circuit - Spring 2010**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This will be my final letter to you before my sabbatical leave (May – July) followed by our move to Burnley Circuit, East Lancashire. It's been surprising how many variations on Burnley you have come up with already – Bolton, Brighton, Blackburn, Barnsley, Bradford, .... no, not Bognor! We move on to a circuit superintendency with pastoral care of two churches: a town centre mission with a pioneering youth project reaching young people on the margins and a newly built church with a joint Baptist-Methodist congregation just out of the town centre. Many people knew nothing of Burnley before this Premiership season! It's one of the poorest parts of England in terms of employment levels, living standards and educational achievement. There's a complex racial mix, the BNP and the Pendle witches – A great place therefore to offer Good News!

Eight years here have gone quickly and we look back mainly with thankfulness to you and to the Lord for our partnership together in the Gospel. Some great and some scary mission moments: London Community Gospel Choir at Feethams, Praise in the Park, Hot Cross Buns in the Cornmill Centre, Sunrise Praise (once in the snow) on Easter Day on West Park Hill, carols on High Row, Cafe services, Passion for Worship, ten trained up new preachers, student drop-in, Youth for Christ in Darlington, Just 10, outreach workers, visiting teams, NE1.... plus all the regular stuff. Not that the church of God has a mission but that the God of mission has a church. Without mission we are not church.

Many people have asked about the sabbatical, a privilege given to ministers for three months every seven years, and now somewhat overdue: Janet and I will be taking the holiday in Ireland that was aborted last year in the wonderfully un-cool campervan. Then I have a mission/teaching week in Czech Republic (with Milan Mrazek) and a further three weeks in Nigeria, political chaos permitting, with the International Learning Centre (through Cliff College, University of Manchester). Between those things I'm researching town centre mission and ministry and have identified a number of key locations in the north of England to survey and write up. Then there's packing – arrgghhh! – and goodbyes.

The Circuit Review is well underway now. Thank you for your help with it we need this evaluative process to be an on-going part of what we do – Having recently sat on the back row of church thinking 'we must stop meeting like this', I fully appreciate the need for us to ask and answer the questions about purpose: Why are we here? About mission: What are we doing? And about vision: Where are we going? And all this to create, under God, church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century whilst remaining faithful to our identity as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic:

One – in unity with Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour as our head.

Holy – dedicated to Christ, transformed by the Spirit, distinctive,  
forgiven, growing in grace.

Catholic – universal, cross cultural, worldwide, inclusive of all who  
will bow to the Lordship of Christ.

Apostolic – missionary in intent and practice, sent out in the power of  
the Spirit with a life changing Gospel of grace.

What is your image of the church, your church? – discuss it with your home group. Reflect on the positives and negatives as they relate to the classic definition above:

Castle, orchestra, body, mission station, family, community of the kingdom, household, building, retreat centre, organisation, tree, safe place, life boat station, rock, lighthouse, field, ark / floating zoo, fellowship, institution, team, priesthood, gift ..... Our view of the church in the world defines our approach to mission.

In Darlington, as in so many places, we see the church at its best and at its worst: loving the Lord, existing for the benefit of those yet to know Christ and bringing people to faith in him; but also at times, inwardly focussed, programmatic, turning people away by entrenched views, majoring on the minors, characterised by the mentality of the yachting club rather than the life boat station. A huge thank you to those very many of you who have partnered with me in the Gospel – a fantastic team of circuit staff and stewards, and local church leaders in every place. Praise God for every way in which his Kingdom grows.

May God continue to bless and use you as you share the grace and power of our Lord Jesus Christ every day.

Phil