



Yorkshire North & East Methodist District

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE DISTRICT CHAIR, THE REVD LESLIE NEWTON

July 2020

Dear friends,

Last year quite a lot of churches were spending time discerning their '20/20 vision'. It was a fitting ophthalmic phrase to adopt in seeking renewed focus for the future. Good as many of these conversations no doubt were, the arrival of Covid-19 has had the effect of transforming the landscape.

As we now spend time looking ahead again to our future life with Covid-19 may I suggest we take seriously another important opticians' test: the quality of our *peripheral vision*. The eyesight of fighter pilots, for example, is carefully tested to ensure they are able to focus not only on what lies directly ahead, but what lies at the edge of visibility.

So, why should we pay close attention to our peripheral vision? Because it's so often 'at the edge of things' where God is to be most deeply encountered. God's heart is always focussed on those who find themselves 'at the edge.' As soon as we settle into a comfort zone – be it in a building, or on a particular programme, or a way of being church - God is likely to be beckoning us to the periphery.

We can't really follow Jesus without recognising this 'edginess.' It's there throughout his earthly life, right from the account of his birth. It's seen in his embrace of tax collectors and sinners, in his healing of lepers and the 'unclean;' in his gradual but deliberate journey from Galilee towards Jerusalem, and his unceremonial crucifixion on a rubbish dump at Calvary. In Acts we see just the same edginess for the early church, as time and again the apostles were pushed way beyond their comfort zone, and towards the edge.

The account of Philip in Acts 8:26-38 is a perfect example. From a flourishing place Philip is sent to the 'wilderness road.' But there he discovers God at work, and has a life transforming encounter.

Pope Francis puts it like this: *'Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel.'*

Acts 8:26-38

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.' The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

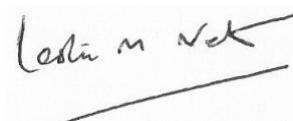
As tempting as it may be, especially in these Covid days, to gravitate quickly towards our comfort zones, please do spend some time looking towards the edges. Let's embrace some hard questions.

- Whose voices are making us feel uncomfortable? Whose voices are we not yet listening to? Are there new and younger voices? Do we need to be challenged by them: perhaps they are prophetic voices in our midst?
- Are we too focussed on our buildings? Are some of them acting as our master rather than our servant, absorbing energy, money and time that could be released more creatively?
- Who among us is offering a fresh creative energy, challenging us to do things differently?
- Who are on the edge in our communities? Who are being overlooked, going hungry, sofa-surfing, struggling to make ends meet? Who need our support because their relationships are crumbling, or their mental health is poor? How can we share Good News with such as these?

These are really tough questions to address, I know. But I firmly believe that it is in taking seriously our peripheral vision that we'll discover a fuller appreciation of how God is at work in our midst and seeking to shape our future.

Journeying to the edge is always risky. It always involves letting go and trusting. But isn't that the life we're called to, the way of losing our life for Christ's sake and in the process finding life in all its fullness?

Every blessing



Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?
Are you still prepared to follow?
Have you made a choice to remain and serve,
though the way be rough and narrow?

*Will you walk the path that will cost you much
and embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you,
the disciples of tomorrow?*

Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
when the multitudes are silent?
Will you make a choice to stand your ground
when the crowds are turning violent?

In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?
Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
will you share your faith with the faithless?

Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
and believe it could be different?
Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?

*We will walk the path that will cost us much
and embrace God's love and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
the disciples of tomorrow.*

Singing the Faith 662. Jacqueline G Jones

Please know of the ongoing care, prayers and support of ministers and lay leaders around our District. If you're struggling to find the support you need, please contact the District Office at admin@yorkshiremethodist.org or on 07809 431871
