

**Toward a 2020 Vision**  
**by Rev Bruce Thompson, Spring Synod 2012**

We know only too well that where there is no vision the people perish.

I have been asked to share my vision for the District.

I will give my newly acquired view that may, given time and further reflection and consultation become our vision for the Methodist Church of Lincolnshire.

It will no doubt change, be changed and become clearer as time goes by. It will no doubt be challenged and become more informed in the light of further experience and conversation. But at this early stage of my ministry here with fresh eyes and a fresh pair of legs I offer what may become for us a vision of what God could have in store for us.

There are at least three aspects to my view.

**Identity.**

**Cooperation.**

**Engagement.**

We could have called these aspects **Connexionalism, Ecumenism and Mission.**

I will explain why I have chosen alternative terms as we go along. But in the meantime let's be honest Connexionalism, Ecumenism and Mission mean nothing to the guy who drops his daughter off at church for brownies on a Monday night.

So let's firstly consider our **identity**

We proudly boast that we are a Connexional Church, and rightly so for all sorts of reasons. We might describe it as being connected. We are not alone. We have links with other congregations.

But the thing that I have struggled with over 26 years of circuit ministry and perhaps others have done so too, particularly as circuits have amalgamated, is what it means to belong to a circuit. Most of the good folk in our pews haven't a clue what circuit means. In recent years it has got more and more difficult to get a decent attendance at circuit events. People don't feel as if they belong to anything other than their local church. As for the District, well it means absolutely nothing to the vast majority of our members. In a sense that's okay but in another it's not okay because we may be missing wonderful opportunities here.

What I think we have lost over the years is an understanding of how local culture can aid the church in her work.

What is it that binds all of our towns and villages together? In our case I believe it to be the county. We all live in Lincolnshire. So what is the point of telling the good people of Boston and Bourne, Scunthorpe and Skegness that their local Methodist Church is part of the Lincoln and Grimsby District? The people of Boston and Bourne have little or nothing to do with Lincoln and Grimsby.

We all live in what is historically known as Lincolnshire, even if there is North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire.

Time and again I surprise the media, local politicians and others including my colleagues in other denominations incidentally when they ask what area the District covers.

This District is much more than a county capital and a fishing port, important though such places are. This District is Belton and Billingham, Beckingham and Alvingham. So we should get real and recognise in its entirety this wonderful county in which we serve. This would give so many of us a greater sense of belonging and it would also help others to identify us.

The Methodist Church of Lincolnshire.

We should seize the opportunities created by the fact that our boundary is almost identical to the old Lincolnshire county boundary. And we are not entirely unique. Only two other Districts have boundaries so closely aligned with counties, Cornwall and Cumbria, the titles of those Districts of course reflect the counties in which they serve and so should ours.

Stickers in cars proclaim 'proud to be a yellow belly'! Maybe we should be proud to be a Methodist yellow belly!

Maybe a District logo should reflect this in some way! Not necessarily with such a slogan, if that's too much for some of us, but certainly with the use of the colours of the Lincolnshire flag that now flies across the county in all sorts of places. I plan to take a flag to the Methodist Conference for my table.

This title and logo would help us in something that occurred to me very shortly after my arrival.

We have 185 churches across the county. Companies would spend a very great deal of money in securing 185 billboards across Lincolnshire. 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year free advertising. Our churches and chapels occupy prominent sites on street corners, at the bus stop, where people live, where people work and shop. If we could coordinate our marketing we would not only raise the profile of the Methodist Church we could convey a Gospel message in a wonderfully effective manner. Consider the Millennium sign campaign. How

good it was to see those green oval boards on churches, how proud we felt and how the message of Christ's birth couldn't go unnoticed. The same poster for an Olympic message is a start. Christmas and Easter can follow. Eventually we could have a more permanent sign that is easily recognisable and effective at doing two things: firstly reminding us that we belong to a much larger body than we sometimes recognize, namely the Methodist Church of Lincolnshire, and secondly we declare to the wider community that we are in every town and almost every village of this county. Coordinating our signage makes a very clear statement.

It would not look good to the residents of Thirlby and Irby if the signs state that the chapels are part of the Lincoln and Grimsby Methodist District; far better to state that we are all part of the Methodist Church of Lincolnshire.

There is at least another means by which we might develop our identity. In a few weeks time we will come together at our Big District Day. As I have travelled around the circuits so many folk have said how much they enjoyed the District gathering together at Lincoln Central for the District welcome last September. It was about being together under one roof. It was about the singing, the worship, the sense of occasion, of celebration and expectation.

Thanks to the hard work of Jane, Liz and Lorna we will gather again in an even bigger way. On Saturday 5 May we will discover more of what it is to be a disciple in today's world.

An annual event of this nature would serve to strengthen our identity as Methodists of Lincolnshire and equip us for being church in our villages and towns, schools and shops.

The second aspect I want to share of my newly acquired view of Methodism in Lincolnshire is the need for **cooperation**.

Many might want to call this ecumenism but the thought of ecumenism fills some with apprehension and even disappointment. It conjures up church bureaucracy, jargon and lengthy consultations, sometimes with little to show for all the effort and time spent.

Some may not be too keen on ecumenical ventures but we do know in our heart of hearts that cooperation is not only vital when our backs are up against the wall but we also get quite a buzz out of it. There is enough of a residue of yesteryear to remind us that a community works best when it has a common threat. If we don't work together we will fail together. In the shadow of air force bases built at a time of great threat to our nation we of all people should know this to be true.

'Rank me with whom you will' is part of our covenant prayer. Covenant means a great deal to us. But its full meaning has been lost a little of late. It has been overused perhaps. Covenant is not a contract, 'you do this or else,' it's about giving without losing.

The Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, and his community know a bit about covenant. He said that if I have £100 and share it with nine others I am left with £10. If I have a thousand acres and share it with nine others I am left with 100. But if I give my love to someone I haven't lost anything, yet I will gain even more. Covenant isn't a financial or property contract it's about grace.

But the term Covenant is (tragically in my opinion) overused and in some quarters devalued by viewing it as a contract that can be broken. If that is so then in our relations with others we may need an additional, untainted term that captures our imagination and best describes something that will provide us with hope for the future.

Sometimes it helps to lift ourselves out of our context and view how others respond to the challenge. China, though rampantly capitalist, remains, what is to our mindset, remarkably cohesive as a community, one that works for the greater good of all. They call it *guanxi*. As a denomination respectfully proud of our particular contribution and understandably wanting to forge ahead yet realising that we can't really go it alone if we are to fulfil our dreams we as Methodists could do worse than reflect upon *guanxi*.

*Guanxi* is described as 'the shared experiences and memories among friends, rather than written contracts and laws that lay the foundations for trust' so needed in a cooperative relationship.<sup>1</sup>

*Guanxi* is about helping others in their need, knowing that at some point it will either be paid back to us in as yet an unforeseen way, or perhaps through the meeting of another's need.

*Guanxi* means that the Chinese are therefore not ashamed of seeking help; for example a newly arrived Chinese immigrant will have no qualms about seeking financial help from a third cousin whom he has never seen.

The relationship we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ could easily draw on an understanding of *guanxi*. Why should we be ashamed to seek help or offer it? Is this not worth reflecting upon as we seek to hold on to our identity without losing the opportunities to work together?

We need projects, local and county-wide. Projects provide us with the opportunities for the shared experience and memory that is so much a part of *guanxi*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Sennett page 135 'Together, the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation' Allen Lane 2012

In the near future there may be a radical restructuring of the Connexion. There may no longer be Districts as we currently know them, they may be replaced by a regional body. We already cooperate with our neighbouring Districts in stationing and training but in the coming years this might become much more formal. Across the county we need to care for the relationship we have built up with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In every village and town that relationship with other denominations will become even more critical if we are to maintain and develop a Christian presence.

Just as our border coincides almost identically with the old county border so it is almost identical to that of the Lincoln Diocese. Again Cornwall and Cumbria are the only other Districts to share this feature with the Truro and Carlisle Diocese respectfully. We need to see this as a God-given opportunity to particularly develop the work of God alongside our Anglican brothers and sisters without losing our significant and developing relationships with other denominations.

Looking further ahead, perhaps over the next decade, some of our communities will become more multi cultural with an increasing presence of those of other faiths. Some, for their own political ends, will seize upon this to create fear and suspicion, deepen division and hostility, especially in a time of economic uncertainty. We must not fall for this.

We have nothing to fear from other faith communities. But we have much to fear from those who are opposed to faith altogether. Which is why I believe we should cooperate with those who express their beliefs in a very different way to our own. It's only a short step from ridiculing one faith to ridiculing another.

So to quickly summarise aspect two of this view of the District the concept of *guanxi* could help us look again at being more cooperative. *Guanxi* can be played out in our relations with those in other denominations and faiths. All this will be of help if a new 'mission-shaped District' covers a much larger area than we do at present which could leave the churches feeling that they are even further removed from the decision-making bodies.

This leads us into the third and final aspect of my current view of the District.

It is vital that we **engage** with others, with those who are seeking meaning and purpose, faith and reason in their lives and world.

The Christian Church is one generation from oblivion. If we don't win people over for Christ we will have failed. But it has always been so; it's never been any different; at any point in our near 2000 year history the Church could have become extinct had it not been for each generation responding to the call of God to engage with others.

I believe that the Christian Church may have reached its nadir in this country. We now have many wonderful opportunities to build from where we are and again engage others in such a way that we can help change their lives and together the world in which we live.

Some will want to call it mission and there is nothing wrong in that, providing we know what we mean by it. You see mission means many things to different disciples. To one it may mean evangelism through Bible study and prayer groups, to another it may mean challenging the social injustices of our time. One form is not more important than the other and we need to recognize that. But there lies our strength as a church. So, we are called to engage in some way with those about us.

Another reason why I have chosen to use the term engagement is because Mrs Jenkins on the back pew is worried about being called to exercise mission. She may think that is something others do. Yet when she buys her weekly paper at the local Spa and listens to the shop assistant's woes she may not appreciate that she is acting as a missionary. But what she does know is that she is engaging in the community. We need every single member of the church to do just that, to know they do it and be made aware of the significance of this vital work.

I have come to believe that for many churches and indeed for individual disciples confidence is a thing that often seems to be lacking. It may not be that we don't know what to do; it may simply be that we need the encouragement that gives the confidence to do it.

With this in mind we are to launch a new course across the churches of our county. Step Forward will be eight sessions looking at developing spirituality and discipleship. It is flexible enough to be adaptable for our varied contexts and aims to address the question 'What does God require of us?' Micah tells us that it is 'to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6.8). No better response is required but it reminds us of our responsibilities, not least that we don't have all the answers if we are to be humble about our engagement with others.

Step Forward packs will be available at the District Day free to those circuits that sign up to the programme.

That is the first proposal to help our engagement with the community.

The second is rather different.

We need to work with consumer choice rather than against it. Once upon a time we only had a couple of TV channels to choose from and passengers on the bus would chat in those days about either Coronation Street or Panorama.

Over the years there has been an exponential increase in channels to such an extent that now we can tailor our viewing schedule to suit our preferences. This is at least a symptom if not a cause of isolation in the world we have created.

But I detect a sea change. Remarkably cinema has continued to provide the opportunity for a shared experience, even if it is now multiplex when once a town would have only one choice of movie. And some churches have learnt from this by offering multiplex worship – maybe this should be developed further with a number of denominations sharing one building and offering within it different styles of worship.

But back to TV which is showing signs of a change in society. Suddenly flagship programmes are attracting large numbers of viewers again. Why is this? Because the viewer is no longer passive but an active member of the audience through phone voting on shows such as the X Factor and Strictly and tweeting on programmes such as Question Time.

People's shared interests continue to bring people together and there has been a revolution in how people communicate, sometimes with different groups at the same time!

Even the period dramas that encourage us to escape the chaos and uncertainty of modern times have become the source of live messaging on social network sites. Last November I sat watching the final episode of Downton with about twelve District Chairs whilst keeping a close eye on my friend's Facebook page, he was in London, my son was at Uni and here I was in a Northampton Conference Centre each of us commenting during every commercial break. A shared experience of that kind was not possible ten years ago and some might think of it as being artificial but it felt a fairly authentic one to me.

Clearly Robert Putnam was right in his ground breaking book 'Bowling Alone' when he pointed out that people are less likely to join a club these days. The example he gave was that of a bowling club; more go bowling but fewer join the club. There lies the challenge for us as a church. Many still have the desire to know the meaning of life, their purpose in the world, to discover and learn but fewer want the commitment that goes with belonging. And yet, and yet, there may well be a sea change.

But whilst we need to work with, rather than against this consumerism, we must proclaim the gospel within it and nurture the link between believers and the worldwide Church.

As I hinted earlier with my experience of watching Downton and commenting on Facebook at the same time, social networks are clearly an indication of belonging to something without the face to face commitment. Perhaps some have had enough of the loneliness of individualism; perhaps, just perhaps, there are new forms of belonging.

Is this an area we need to explore and invest in? Should we have a parallel community to the one we greet at the door on a Sunday; to the one we wash the cups and saucers for

after morning worship? Should there be, in addition to the one some of us have known and valued for so long, a different form of community to which people might belong? One where needs are met in ways very different to the ones we grew up with.

A real investment of resources into a cutting edge web site that is attractive, interactive and far reaching would be one way of engaging with the world beyond the four walls of a church building. Perhaps as the Methodist Church of Lincolnshire we should even consider employing someone to do this, someone with theological training and pastoral experience to engage with a so called virtual congregation.

Numerous ministers provide a web presence, through blogs, social networks and web sites but what about taking this a step further? Could we as a District not explore the possibility of developing an official web site that is truly creative in not only providing information about the churches across our county but one that is in addition a virtual community, with relevant daily prayers, perhaps through a live webcast, imaginative meditations, open discussions and a place for closed confidential support. The site could also link with other communication pathways such as texting, social network sites and syndicated feeds. The difference between what we currently have and where we might go could be that the website is not just focused on information sharing: it would be a place where ministry is done, a community is built and where people can be signposted.

I confess to being a dinosaur when it comes to IT but I have taken advice and such a project may well be worth pursuing.

Now time today does not allow us to go into two other ways in which we can engage in the community, these would be more localised, personal and socially active approaches.

I strongly believe that at some point we should explore more deeply how we as the churches of Lincolnshire link into the Transitional Towns network. The power of those who act collectively is immense and we can make a huge difference in our local communities by acting in this way.

A second approach, emanating from a vastly different context is the citizenship movement. London Citizens, now Citizens UK, began as a campaign for the living wage. It has gathered churches around a single issue and united them in a common cause; it is making a real difference in the lives of many. We could learn from their methods.

Our District is strong on many aspects of our mission and ministry for which we give thanks but we ought not to overlook our social responsibility, particularly so in the current climate of economic change that will result in even greater hardship for so many vulnerable people and communities. We have a voice and should use it on behalf of those who have difficulty in making themselves heard.

So these are just three aspects of my view for the District:

1. **Identity** – a change of District title to the Lincolnshire Methodist District with coordinated signage across the county and annual celebrations
2. **Cooperation** – with other denominations and faiths, indeed if we jump to point three with those who may be outside of faith altogether so that we might be more effective in getting the message across, changing the lives of others and together the world in which we live
3. **Engagement** – by being equipped through small groups we grow in confidence when encountering those we meet in our daily lives. Then there is the possibility of a cutting edge virtual congregation through an interactive web site. Not forgetting that we might link in more local groups such as the Transition Network and learn from the work of Citizens UK.