

Talk given at The District Day – May 2012

By Rev Bruce Thompson, Chair of District

At Synod a few weeks ago I presented a paper giving an outline of my view of the District seven months into this role.

It focused on three aspects:

Identity

Cooperation

Engagement

I want to look at each of these in turn again today offering reflections upon them and a few practical possibilities for us.

Firstly, identity

One of the downsides to life in our time is the anonymity that goes with it.

We live in an age where neighbours never speak let alone know each other.

Loneliness is one of the great sadness's of our society.

A consequence of this is lonely Christians.

We have become so use to living alone, in our self-contained homes, that we seem unable to be part of community anymore.

As a human race we have forgotten what it is to be 'village', each dependent upon the other for sustenance and support.

Isolation is not too great a step from anonymity.

With the pressures we face as congregations to maintain let alone raise our profile in the community we are left feeling alone.

We are proud of our county. We are proud to live in Lincolnshire and by Lincolnshire I mean the old, traditional county that evolved over centuries, not the government imposed boundaries that reduced the county to three different authorities and more.

People are proud of their village and proud of their county.

We are not just a chapel isolated from the rest.

We are part of a bigger network that we currently call the Lincoln and Grimsby District and I hope will one day recognize that we are all in the old county of Lincolnshire. As I said at Synod – The Lincolnshire Methodist District would be a more accurate reflection of whom we are and where we are.

Identity, as accurate an identity as possible, is important when we seek to create a sense of belonging, an ability to interact and a willingness to undertake new ventures.

History has shown time and again the importance of identity.

Lose one's identity and much of our reason for being is lost with it. We become impotent in the face of challenge and change.

But all is not lost, far from it, as we can see from the experience of Peter.

Peter denied his identity in the courtyard of Caiaphas but later he was charged with the responsibility of giving believers a new identity.

The Early Church was marked out as a community of people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, that the next world was about to break into the present one, that God was doing extraordinary things.

This was expressed in all sorts of ways not least in teaching and learning, in faith and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and a life of prayer.

Their togetherness was evident in the way they held everything in common, selling their possessions and goods and giving to everyone in need.

Today we are marking ourselves out as the Methodist Church of Lincolnshire.

- We have come from our own chapels and churches, situated in hamlets, villages, market towns and urban areas.
- We have come for teaching and learning.
- We have come for faith and fellowship.
- We will leave here more resolved to be the Church wherever we may find ourselves and that Church is the Methodist Church of Lincolnshire.

We are not alone. We are not isolated. We have a common identity.

And we can, and we will, raise that profile high in our communities.

We don't belong to a little, insignificant cause. We are part of a movement that joins with others in changing this part of God's world.

This leads us nicely into point two: Cooperation.

As I have said many times on my journeys round the District this past eight months – the thing that I have become aware of more and more is the lack of confidence so many have in what they stand for and what they do.

This is not unique to our part of God's world.

Christianity and in particular the Christian Church on these islands we call the British Isles has taken a bit of a hammering these past 50 years.

For all sorts of reasons waves have battered the boat in which we are sailing.

Storm clouds gathered on the horizon, the winds of change swept in and the waves rose high against the sides of our well-constructed boat.

The boat had been fit for purpose for so long, sufficient for transporting us from this world to the next and seemingly buoyant in times of squall.

But the boat has run aground in places, taken on water in some very choppy currents, not an insignificant number have fallen overboard while some have abandoned ship altogether.

Clearly things have to change.

- The crew needs help.
- We cannot rescue the ship alone.
- The lifeboats need to draw alongside.
- The construction of a more sea-worthy vessel needs to be undertaken for the destination, though some way off, is within reach.

There are more than 50,000 people who attend church across Lincolnshire. 50,000. That is an extraordinarily large number of people. Clearly our role in Lincolnshire society is not insignificant.

If we cling to the feeble raft formed out of the remains of our battered ship we will be lost at sea.

If we accept that it is necessary to swim to other more sea-worthy vessels, or be willingly taken on board by those who are seeking to navigate to our intended destination then we have a real chance, a very real chance of getting there.

You may know the Hasidic tale of a man lost in the forest. Try as he might he couldn't find the way out. One day he stumbled upon another man. He was excited at seeing another human and asked 'Tell me, do you know the way out of the forest?' 'No', said the second man 'I am lost but I have discovered where the forest is most dense so let us work together to find the way out.'

Others may be in a predicament too, lost in the forest of life seeking faith; maybe we can help them as much as they can help us.

After all we are not in it for our sakes; we are in it to raise awareness of the presence of God in the lives of those about us, in the schools, shops, workplace and places of sport and recreation.

And this leads into our third point: Engagement.

From Mary's Magnificat to the sermon at Nazareth, from the baptism in the Jordan to the crucifixion in Jerusalem, from the healing of the paralytic to the resurrection, from the fishermen by the lakeside to the women in the garden the gospel is all about engagement.

Minds are enlightened, lives are transformed, society is changed and nothing is ever the same again when Jesus enters the scene.

- From the writing of letters and books to the foundation of libraries and universities,
- from the bathing of a single man's wounds to high-tech hospitals across the globe,
- from challenging the hypocrisy of religious authorities to the overthrowing of dictatorships the gospel has changed our world.

In our place and time we have a job to do.

Hide behind the four walls and five hymn sandwich, like them though I do, and I know we are as good as finished. In such a scenario the world would be a far worse place than it is now because of our demise.

We live in terrifyingly turbulent times. Anxiety at what may lie ahead in terms of financial stability and standards of living are causing many to draw in on themselves.

It is in an age such as this that the Church has prospered. People become more aware of the fact that we need more than the material comforts of recent times. No one is going to be exempt from the coming challenges of austerity.

As a Christian Church we have a responsibility to meet needs as best we can. And if we don't have the resources to do so then we must badger those who do have and urge them to share those resources or fund us to meet the needs about us.

In this we can all play a part.

If it's not on what may appear to be a grand scale we can still change the lives of those about us.

If we do love people

- we will make time for them,
- we will listen to them,
- we will walk with them in times good and bad,
- remember them and pray for them,
- act with them and for them.

As I wander round the District I see so many projects already underway.

Never underestimate the coffee morning, the drop in, the telephone call, the transport rota, the provision of facilities for local groups, the willingness to support others in schools, community centres, charity shops, voluntary organizations and the like.

We have much to achieve and we will achieve much.

By the grace of God

- we will change and be changed
- will be seen and valued
- we will fulfil our calling and be filled with a life beyond our previous imagining.

In all of this I am full of Hope.

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