



Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I would ordinarily have sought to have written this letter earlier, wanting to embark on a new Methodist Church year with our best foot forward seeking to follow the way of Christ. Unfortunately, September brought the disruption of covid to myself and my family. Thankfully we have all recovered and the disruption was minimised. I was mindful at the time that as we have become more familiar with living with covid, it caused a pandemic which not only changed the world as we know it, but it also caused devastation, with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. It is a stark reminder of how much we have journeyed through over recent years, and not forgetting how God is faithful.

As we step into this new year, I want us to recognise the remarkable efforts of so many people who have contributed to the ongoing growth and developments around the circuit. We continue with the provision of worship at home written and recorded services. We continue to engage with online meetings in a mixed economy of ways to gather, having learnt of the enabling and environmental benefits. We continue to seek new ways of being a church, of living out being a Christian presence within our local communities and new ways of worshipping, including in beyond chapel buildings. We have seen new life in Melmerby with gatherings in the village hall and we have hope in the new life being discovered in Finghall and Kirkby Malzeard.

If the above wasn't enough to be thankful for with the ongoing growth and developments, we can include more. The Herald, the circuit newsletter goes from strength to strength and still to reach its full potential around the circuit as more people discover its great value. The Mission and Ministries gatherings continue to gain traction, being a place of encouragement and inspiration, and a significant listening post to giving more voice to each church. The Circuit Mission policy, which is a living document, was reviewed and updated recently and is for us to hearten active engagement beyond the words on a page. The local preachers and worship leaders are positively engaging with continuing local preacher's development sessions. These sessions aid and equip for us greater engagement through our preaching and worship leading.

I could spotlight many other positive developments happening around the circuit, which I hope you would agree are good signs of God growing and shaping the type of church we are being called to be for today. Whilst I can write to you about the ongoing growth and development making us better shaped for witness and ministry, there are challenges too. These challenges come in different forms, some are presented by being church in the world, others are brought by circumstances, and certain challenges are about culture change of behaviours. These are challenges that, when met with the truth and light of God, become less challenging. It does mean we need to look honestly at the contemporary context we find ourselves, who we are and how we conduct ourselves. As the prayer of confession remind us, 'if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' Saying sorry, confessing our sins means changing our sinful ways in pursuit of holiness. When we know forgiveness from God through Jesus Christ, we are changed and are called to live that change in all areas of our lives.

We have before us opportunities to respond with the gospel as we travel another year together, with the cost-living-crisis, the relentless war on the Ukraine, the latest country to be faced with the devastation and cruelty of evil attacks on innocent people. Whilst we grasp at the most cost-efficient ways to keep warm, global warming and climate change does not relent. The effects of which are being seen around the world in a succession of extreme weather conditions, destructive

storms, flooding, and wildfires. All these speak of injustices in differing forms. All these impact us all and for us all to respond in the which ever way we are able. For the Christian, we seek to respond with the gospel. The gospel that God's Kingdom has come, and we live by God's Kingdom rule and values. The gospel that we have a redeemer, Jesus Christ, Saviour to all. I hope we will have courage to always respond with the gospel. I hope we will remain faithful to serve God in the places and ways we are called to serve. I am greatly heartened when I see so many loving responses already happening, with many more in the pipeline around the circuit. Community fridges, warm spaces, English lessons, friendship groups are but a few of these and I thank God for all those involved. Let's keep holding each other and our local communities in prayer, a great way to give support and it makes all the difference when we put ourselves in God's hands.

An annual opportunity for sharing the good news and being a visible Christian presence is at Masham Sheep fair. It was my second time of spending the weekend in a field with the church about the Dales trailer. We were blessed to have an 'All We Can' representative come along on the Saturday. She brought with her a tandem bicycle to illustrate the way in which 'All We Can' work with communities in developing countries. The tandem bicycle shows how support can be provided by the rear cyclist which represents All We Can, whilst the front cyclist steers and this represents those from the communities being supported. The tandem bike gained lots of attention and stimulated conversations about the work of All We Can throughout the day. It wasn't just there to look at either with the use of bike stand and a dynamo attached could charge a mobile phone. Lots of children and young people enjoyed having a go. The Sunday brought a change of engagement in the shape of a prayer tree which people could tie a ribbon to while praying. This became a beautiful tree in full blossom of prayer. It was quite moving to see how people were confident to stop amidst all the other visitors to pray. The weekend was full of fruitful conversations, not least a boy with his Mum who wanted to talk about Christianity and the Bible which he had recently begun to read for the first time.

I cannot be certain, but suspect, that I contracted Covid whilst leading collective worship in one of the four schools I went into during the first week of the new school term. Covid aside, I was so encouraged by all the school children in the way they engaged in that week's theme on prayer. Presently I have regular engagement with six primary schools, the High school on special occasions and have welcomed Mowbray School into the church at Christmas and for their Harvest services. My background is in this area when I served in the role of a Community Youth Evangelist and now in my present presbyteral ministry this engagement with the local schools provides a great way of getting to know and to be known within the local community. I often have conversations with parents whose children have recognised me and said hello. Over the summer we were successful in receiving a seed grant from the District to fund taking Lego Journeys into the schools. This is presently being developed and would value prayer support as the ministry into schools grows.

My hope and prayer for this coming year is that we will embrace stepping forward with God in ways which nurture all to enable us to be flourishing Christians and Church communities of faith.

I hope that we will pray without ceasing and seek God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always to shape and guide us. I want to encourage churches to be active in worship, open to becoming more accessible to all, involving all our senses in the ways we are met and led by God.

Grace and peace,

Yours in Christ,

*Gareth*

Revd Gareth Baron