

Mission at festivals and events

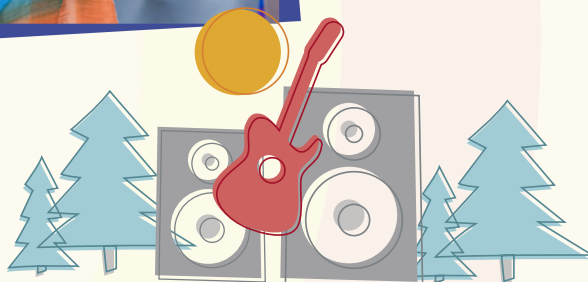
In what ways does your church or circuit show up at local music festivals, sports or other events, or community gatherings? This resource offers an introduction for groups from churches, circuits or districts who are seeking to be present at festivals or events in different ways.

What does mission at festivals and events mean?

It means intentionally being present as a group of Christians in non-religious places that aren't affiliated with the Christian faith. It's not about fundraising, it's not about converting people, and it's not about judging anyone. It is about being a blessing; loving and listening; unashamedly as a group of Christians witnessing to your faith. This might mean offering prayer and worship, craft activities, space for conversation and story sharing, food and drink, or more.

Here are some examples of the kinds of things this might mean:

- Booking a stall at a local summer fete or Christmas fair
- Hosting a venue at a nearby music festival
- Taking a roving team of 'event angels' to a sports event
- Running a church tent at a county show
- Setting up a stand outside a church on the route of a Pride march, festival or event
- ...and so much more!



Why should we be at festivals and events?

Being present as Christians in these places gives us an amazing opportunity to meet new people, build relationships, offer hospitality and welcome, hold safe space for people to explore faith in creative, spiritual or conversational ways and take our Methodist Church way beyond the walls of our buildings. It also offers us energising and accessible ways for all Christians – no matter their age, background or belief – to engage in mission and witness.

Going where the people gather

We might think of evangelism as being mostly about inviting new people to come and join us – the Church. But this understanding, where we expect others to join us in worship or fellowship, can be hard work and ineffective. Our buildings, services and events are not always that appealing to people who aren't used to them. A different kind of understanding of evangelism is where we, the Church, go out to be where the people gather, seeking out places where we can appropriately share the good news of God in the way we act, speak and are. It's effective, because it allows us to meaningfully connect with others, to operate in partnership, and it surprises people who don't expect Christians to be in those places.

It's essential that this kind of outreach is supported by prayer. When you're planning your mission at festivals or events you should pray together as a team or committee. You may also wish to recruit a dedicated prayer support team who will be on a rota to pray throughout the duration of the event. This can also be an excellent way to utilise the gifts of everyone in your church, those who don't feel called to be the do-ers and the talk-ers at an event can be the pray-ers!

What kind of event?

If you don't already have an event in mind, then find out what's on near you. Don't worry about trying to pair your congregation with a suitable event. It is always impressive how people will rise to an occasion. Websites such as www.thefestivalcalendar.co.uk list different kinds of events. There will be many smaller events and festivals not listed on these pages, however, and so you may find it easier just to search online for the following kinds of events in your area:

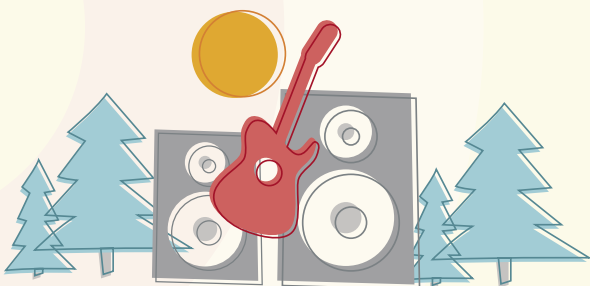
- Cultural festivals, such as local music, arts, literary, comedy, theatre, film or history festivals or re-enactments
- Events that celebrate and seek justice and equality, such as Carnival, Black Lives Matter protests or Pride festivals and events. Please see specific resources for engaging in Pride marches here: www.methodist.org.uk/methodistsatpride
- Rural-focused events, such as county or agricultural shows
- Seasonal fetes and fairs
- Sports events, such as marathons, football matches or horse trials.
- Motor racing and rally events, such as vintage steam rallies, soapbox derbies or motorbike racing
- Food and drink festivals, such as cheese shows or street food festivals.

Before you start planning

It's important to do your research first before you start planning anything. One of the best ways to do this is simply by attending the event as a punter and observing the following:

Is there already a group of Christians doing something here?

It may be that another church group is already attending the event. It's unlikely that event managers will give you a space if they have an existing relationship with a Christian group. Find out from your local churches and community who is already involved or on the committee and ask them what is offered. It may be that there are jobs or roles that need volunteers. Be willing to serve! Remember, these events take a lot of organising and hard work. Or, you could find another event to be at that doesn't already have a Christian presence. It's a good idea to ask around in your ecumenical networks to check if other churches are planning anything or if anybody would like to partner with you.



What kind of people come?

Is it a family event? What's the demographic of the audience in terms of age and identity? Look at what the traders are selling. Is there any openness to spirituality of diverse kinds, such as tarot card readings or new age spirituality? What sort of food and drink is available? What kind of traders come and which are the busiest?

What is it that people here need?

Look around and see what's needed. If it's a busy festival, there might be a need for a quiet space for people to come to get away from the hustle and bustle of the event, where there is water to drink and a sofa to sit on. Whatever you offer, it's essential that it's contextually appropriate for the event while remaining authentic to who you are as a church community.

Who are the organisers?

Finding out who the organisers are is key to your presence at the event. If it is a local event, see if anyone in your church knows the organisers or has a connection of some kind. If you build a good relationship, it is likely you will find yourself asked back year-on-year.

Case Study

Penrith Methodist Circuit support their local Skelton Agricultural Show each year. They are one of the show's many local sponsors. A local circuit steward acts as the key contact point with the show committee and convenes a small circuit planning group, which mobilises a larger circuit team. Between them they volunteer by selling programmes on the gates and providing a circuit marquee offering free refreshments, a space to shelter from the sun or rain, conversation and activities to engage all ages in conversation.

Planning your offering – a roving team

If you're planning on taking a roving team to an event then you should check out Festival Angels as a model for the way this can be done: www.festivalangels.org.uk. Do make sure you find out if the event you're researching already has such a team.

A roving pastoral team can be a great way to offer a caring, conversational presence across a big event space (for example a city-wide arts festival or a large music festival). You can wear something (like branded T-shirts or jackets) which identifies you as Christians, and carry rucksacks full of bottled water or snacks or rain ponchos to give away. If you walk slowly around the location of the event, you can look out for people who might want to chat or might need assistance in some way. You'll be amazed by how many people want to talk to you.

If you're offering a roving team, it's essential that you talk to the event organisers about doing something like this – don't just show up!

It's also essential to offer your volunteers training on their role, safeguarding, listening skills, and also potentially on first aid and topics such as drugs and alcohol – depending on the event where you're volunteering.

Planning your offering – running a venue

If you're planning on running a space (like a venue in a tent, or a stand or stall) ask yourselves the following questions:

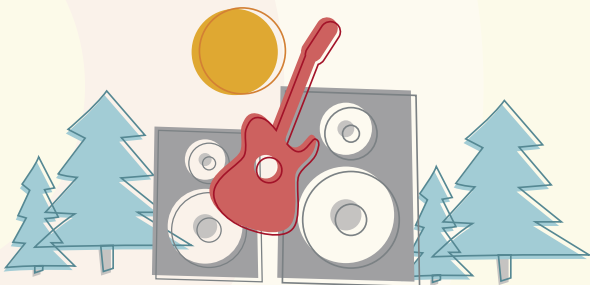
How does it encourage conversation?

Real conversations change things. The chance to really connect with another person changes us, changes the other, and can even change the world. Encouraging conversation needs to be at the heart of your event presence.

How is it interactive?

Activities like arts and crafts (for children and adults) draw people into the tent and mean they sit down for some time; they might also want to chat while crafting or colouring. It's a rare opportunity for adults to be creative.

Look around your congregation to see what skills people have that they could share – such as woodwork or crochet.



How is it hospitable and welcoming?

It's a good idea to offer refreshments, ideally for free. The atmosphere of your space is very important to making it feel right. You may wish to use Christian imagery or banners, pot plants, artwork on easels, or fairy lights or bunting. It needs to feel appropriate for the context of the event, comfortable and safe, while also spiritual. Relaxed seating like sofas make a massive difference in helping a space feel comfortable and inviting, especially at events where people are camping. Amazing conversations happen on a sofa with a cup of tea and a piece of cake.

How does it point towards Jesus?

You're not there to proselytise or convert, but you are there, distinctively and confidently Christian, to point towards faith in Jesus. You can plant or water seeds of faith, change people's minds and hearts about Christians, open up faith conversations, invite people into an experience of prayer or worship and share God's love through care and hospitality. You might want to include offerings that are faith focused, such as prayer trees, prayer labyrinths or services of morning or evening prayer. Or offer giveaways such as crosses, or pebbles, cards or keyrings with verses from Scripture.

Want more advice and guidance?

The Meon Valley Methodist Circuit has been running the 'Elemental Tent' at the Wickham Festival in Hampshire for many years – a space of hospitality, conversation, and spirituality (photo above). Pete Bangs, the Circuit Pioneer Missioner, has written an excellent resource pack that formed the basis of this introductory guide. It offers significantly more guidance, and includes lots of practical advice, resources and training materials for your team. Please contact Holly Adams on adamsh@methodistchurch.org.uk to request a copy of the pack.

Thanks to Pete and the Meon Valley Methodist Circuit for all their work and wisdom shared.