

“For such a time as this...”

Enabling conversations
about ministry in the
time of Covid-19 –
and beyond

Introduction

The year 2020 will inevitably be remembered for the pandemic that brought whole nations to a standstill. This has been a time of loss for everyone, in different ways – loss of freedom, loss of work, and for many, the tragic loss of a loved one. And yet, in such dark times, there have been glimmers of light, as millions of people have discovered new ways to minister to their neighbours in a time of crisis.

Let’s talk about ministry

The Methodist Church in Britain understands that *everyone* is called to ministry. Together, God’s people are called to continue Jesus’ ministry of witness and service, both in our church buildings and in the wider world. Ministry:

- begins with God
- is the calling of every Christian
- is corporate, always exercised as part of the Body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit blesses individuals with particular gifts and graces, so that they can share in this corporate ministry in their own unique way.

The Methodist Church understands that most ministry happens not within our church buildings, but in the wider world. Unfortunately, we often struggle to talk about ministry in its broadest, richest sense, and find ourselves focusing almost exclusively on ordination.

During the pandemic, as thousands of church buildings stood empty, many Methodists found themselves ‘being church’ and ‘ministering’ in new ways. Witnessing to people in their homes through a computer screen. Serving those who found themselves unemployed and plunged into food poverty. Home-schooling. Shopping for neighbours. Many continued to juggle work and family commitments as they had for years, amid the uncertainties of a pandemic. As a society,

we began to realise the value of those who had always been there for us, as NHS staff, as supermarket workers, as delivery drivers. As a Church, forced out of our buildings, we began to put into practice what we had declared many years earlier: “The ministry of the people of God in the world is both the primary and the normative ministry of the Church.”¹

But how do we celebrate and encourage the fresh expressions and understandings of ministry that began to emerge during the pandemic as we return to our buildings and some sense of ‘normality’? This resource is intended to help local churches and their leaders to enable conversations about different expressions of ministry (and how they might have developed during the pandemic and beyond); to affirm people in their calling; to celebrate the richness of the Church’s corporate ministry; and above all, to give glory to God. It includes some practical suggestions for encouraging people to share their stories of ministry, signposts to further resources, and three examples of how individuals have found themselves ministering in new ways during the pandemic.

Practical suggestions

Sadly, many Methodists believe that ministry is something done by someone else (usually, somebody in a clerical collar!). The first step in encouraging others to share the story of how they have exercised ministry over recent months is therefore to help them recognise that they *are* engaged in ministry! You can find some suggestions for opening up this conversation as a church family on the Methodist Church website at www.methodist.org.uk/ministry-conversations. However, the best way is through conversations with individuals (and all members of the church can be encouraged to share in such conversations together). Listen carefully as they tell you about their experience over recent months – of their life at home, at school, at

1 *The Ministry of the People of God in the World*, 1990 Conference Agenda, p. 539.

work, and their journey with God. Ask questions, and gently point out those ways in which God appears to have been at work through them. Then, ask if they might be willing to share their testimony more widely, perhaps by...

- speaking during worship, in person or online. Perhaps the minister or local preacher leading the service could 'interview' them about their experience? Why not have a series of such interviews over a number of weeks, showcasing the rich variety of ministries among your congregation?
- taking part in a series of brief video testimonies produced by the church or circuit. Take a look at the **#LoveThisCalling videos** at www.methodist.org.uk/lovethiscalling for inspiration
- writing an article for the church or circuit magazine
- sharing their story with a small group, perhaps as part of a series on ministry. You could incorporate the Bible study materials exploring ministry, available at www.methodist.org.uk/ministry-bible-study-materials.

Candidates for ordained ministry usually receive a great deal of support as they discern the shape of the ministry to which God has called them. How might your church offer the same level of support to those called to share in ministry in other ways – particularly those called to serve beyond the walls of the church? Are there individuals who could be trained and equipped to serve as mentors, journeying

alongside those discerning the shape of God's call on their lives at home, at work, at school? Through these conversations, how might the local church help individuals to recognise their God-given gifts and talents, and to see what they *already do* as sharing in the Church's ministry?

Prayer

Loving and merciful God,
in times of change and fear
you call up women and men
to be your hands and feet in a hurting world,
and to minister to your people.
In times of stability and peace
help us still to listen for your voice
pointing out the needs of our neighbours
calling us to a life of ministry and service.
Help us to be true to our calling
to affirm others in theirs
and, in all things, to give you glory.
In the name of your Son Jesus, the one who
calls us to follow. Amen.

Further resources

- For information about ministry in the Methodist Church (in its broadest sense) visit www.methodist.org.uk/ministryinthemethodistchurch
- For information about vocations, www.methodist.org.uk/vocations
- For information and practical suggestions for the sharing of testimony, visit www.methodist.org.uk/yearoftestimony.

Ministering to disciples: how a call to ministry took shape and moved online during lockdown

Before the pandemic, I'd been considering whether God was calling me into full-time ministry, but I didn't want to uproot my three children who were all doing well in school. In December 2019, I felt led with two others to start some midweek worship services in a small Methodist chapel in Burham, Kent. We persisted even though we didn't see many attend. When the first lockdown occurred in 2020, we took the meeting online. This was a time of great blessing as we saw

people join from around the UK, Brazil, the USA and the Caribbean. We commenced a weekly prayer meeting via Zoom, and a Bible study that had met in my home for years also moved online.

At the time, I was working as a teaching assistant for autistic children. But my minister told me about a job opportunity at a local Christian charity and I was immediately convinced that this is where the Lord wanted me to serve. In the months since I joined the charity I've

now gotten a new position with responsibility for sharing the good news of Jesus with our clientele, comprised mainly of ex-offenders, homeless people and those struggling with addiction. We have seen some people accept Jesus and meet daily for prayer and worship. We are planning to start an Alpha Course and discipleship groups. This pandemic has grown and stretched us in ways we never saw before but it is for God's glory and honour.

Julien, local preacher



Ministry in a bag: how many people in one church ministered to those on the margins during lockdown

For Breakfast Church last year, our minister suggested to me the idea of Lent bags as a children's activity. I made 12 small cloth bags for the children to pack with little things to remind them of the temptations story,



saying: "Bring your bag back on Palm Sunday and we will refill it with Easter things." Except by then we were in lockdown! So, 20 new bags were made, with a palm leaf and cross, story book, crosses, and of course chocolate eggs, and delivered to those children and others in our wider circle.

By Christmas we were back in lockdown. More bags were made by a team of sewers, for children and also for older friends who had been struggling with isolation. Donations of money and chocolate arrived, plus offers of help with packing and delivering 55 pretty cloth bags. They held story books, tiny bags of frankincense and myrrh with a golden chocolate coin, battery tea-lights with hand-painted

holders, and more chocolate!

Lent came again, still in lockdown, and deliveries were made of books and giveaways and then a final bag for Easter, this time for all adults and children on our church and community lists – 85 adult bags, reaching 105 adults, and 54 children's bags.

Sewers, cooks, donors, packers, deliverers and receivers, everyone who was part of this unexpected but God-led mission, felt the shared love of God in the work of the Church in lockdown. The opportunity for doorstep conversations was so appreciated. Why did we do this? Simply – to say "God loves you, we love you" to each person at a time when life was so hard.

Monica, local preacher