



Going for Growth

HOWARD MELLOR

Howard Mellor shares insights on growing congregations in the Methodist Church in the 1980's and how these might be revisited in today's context.

Have you heard the one about almost half of Methodist Churches reporting growing congregations? Really it is true, or at least it was. In case you are not convinced, here is a summary of the details.

This is not ancient history and only a mere forty years ago. We go back to the early 1980s. In those 'far off days' the Methodist Home Mission Division received the 'October count' from churches across the country. Every three years there was a deep dive to look at the number of members, attendances and community rolls. A report was sent to Conference the following year.

Astonishingly in the years 1980-83 over 30% of Methodist churches reported increases of at least 10% in membership or attendance or both. One of the Home Mission staff, Rev David Bridge, gathered a team of skilled researchers, church growth

specialists and statisticians. The numbers in 1983 were checked and found correct.

When the 1986 figures were reported it showed 47% of Methodist churches reported increased congregations. Indeed, the number of churches reporting increases of at least 20% between 1980 and 1986 was 600 (six hundred!). Of these 250 churches, a representative sample across the connexion, were chosen for detailed study.

The findings of the research group were published in a document entitled, 'The Missionary Shape of the Congregation'. It reveals, in considerable detail, the research undertaken, but more importantly highlights six features of these growing congregations. They were:

- The quality of pastoral care
- A fresh look at worship

- A ministry which relates to the needs of people at every phase of their lives
- A collaborative style of leadership
- Special emphasis on the ministry of evangelism
- The absence of a link between the number of churches looked after by a minister

'All these are strikingly ordinary!' As Revd Dr Donald English put it in the Foreword to this document, 'No church is excluded from the possibility of this kind of growth'.

In the recent changes to the structures of our church, the collective memory of the research was lost. Indeed, when in 2017 Drs Andrew Orton and Peter Hart from Durham University undertook their research into 6 (six) growing churches in the North-East of England, published as 'Leading

Together in Growing Methodist Churches', the earlier research was not known to them.

However, the five principles they identified were broadly in line with the factors identified by David Bridge and colleagues. In summary, Orton and Hart highlighted: welcome and hospitality, being responsive and inclusive to people, focussing on accessible spiritual development opportunities, collaborative leadership and being able to face change and overcome barriers.

One element was missing in both cases. In a telling sentence, David Bridge comments in 'The Missionary Shape of the Congregation': 'We know how to help people gather for worship, though we have not yet found the best way to help people gather specifically for prayer.' Meeting for corporate prayer is still either absent or a 'minority sport'.

This raises the questions about how we respond now to 'Missionary Shape' and begin to apply the learning for our church life today. My summary of all this is that we need to cut through the tsunami of admin and concentrate on sharing our faith, welcome all people to worship, serve the community, stand for justice and care for creation.

I recommend starting with prayer, then vision building and planning for what 'Missionary Shape' called 'intentional evangelism'.

How to do this? In the early days of Fresh Expressions (FX), Bishop Jack Nichols (then Bishop of Sheffield) was on the FX Board. I recall him saying that the best time for mission was between Easter and Pentecost. Days were lighter, he said, the weather was better, people were more hopeful and there are two bank holiday weekends to use. Now I have personally been involved in

many missions at different times of the year, but I concede he has something in such a timing. Lent is for discipleship and the season from Easter to Pentecost could be prime time for sharing faith. The post-Pentecost season could be for nurturing new Christians, exploring faith with people.

Let this short article be a challenge to engage prayerfully and as communities of grace in sharing our faith with others regularly. From time to time let us do so intentionally and 'offer Christ' to the circles of contact with our churches. If we start there the circles will become ever wider, the opportunities ever greater. You never know; we might all be surprised by the results.

REV DR G. HOWARD MELLOR

Rev Dr G. Howard Mellor is a retired Methodist Minister living in Winchester. He ministered in diverse congregations in four circuits. Between 1983 and 1994 he was Director of Evangelism for the Methodist Church based at Cliff College and then became Principal. He is hoping to produce a book by early 2026 on growing healthy churches and deepening discipleship.

