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Wednesday, 2 June 2021

Dear friends

Circuit Pastoral Letter June 2021

When she was Prime Minister, Theresa May talked of those people who were JAMs - the Just About Managing. She noted that many people coped okay, whilst some clearly didn't manage at all, and needed support. However, between the two there were people who didn't quite fail, but teetered on the brink all the time. They were, indeed, just about managing. Life for them was permanently anxious, without hope of a better tomorrow, and with the threat of disaster always hanging over them.

During my lifetime, the Church has been JAM - Just About Managing. We moved without really noticing from having large, vibrant Sunday Schools to having few if any children in our congregations. We went from having congregations that comfortably filled up our pews (as they all were then!) to being able to space out our chairs to make the place look less empty. But we carried on, with individuals giving of their time, money and energy unstintingly, generously, sacrificially, and we kept going...Just About Managing.

In fairness, over the years we have said, 'We can't go on like this!' And then we have just carried on. An ever diminishing band of volunteers take up roles and responsibilities with the Church. A smaller and smaller number of increasingly aged and frail people have kept the fabric of the building together. The average age of our preachers has gone up and up as the number of them has gone down and down.

Now we have reached the point where we really cannot go on. A look at the Preaching Plan for June to August shows a lot of spaces. Most congregations are happy with this as we emerge from lockdowns (though we are not yet certain that we will emerge just yet). However, the reality is that when I made the Plan, I used every offer that I received from Local Preachers (and one or two more in some cases where I could get away with it) and put in 'Local Arrangement' to fill the gaps. There is no more preaching capacity in our Circuit. We cannot go back to where we were - even if we wanted to, the preachers are not there.

At the same time, those wonderful people who have been stewards, treasurers, property secretaries, pastoral leaders, preachers etc are finding it increasingly difficult to continue. Recruiting replacements is becoming a very real issue. Up to now, our strategy has seemed to be to stagger on until a crisis occurs. At that point, we close the chapel. That's not a thought-through strategy - it's a 'head in the sand' approach. We have squandered the resources that our forebears, and God, have graciously given us.

So, if we cannot go on like we have, what do we do? There are options: we can strategically choose where to focus our mission. We can ensure that our properties are where they need to be, not necessarily where they historically have been found. We can merge congregations, or just Church Councils, operating as 'one church on multiple sites'. We may, in all honesty, come to the conclusion that we have spent all our time, effort and energy on maintaining our premises to the detriment of making new disciples. We may even admit that we have been guilty of worshipping our buildings, which can be so precious to us, instead of worshipping God.

What should our focus be? Where should we be spending our resources? How can we be effective as Church in the 21st Century?

The last strange year, without church services in person, has forced us to use Zoom and YouTube in ways that we had neglected before. We have begun to be an online church as well as a face to face one. It has also made us realise that we have an opportunity to stop and reflect, and make bold, imaginative, brave decisions.

To this end, an invitation will be sent to all those in our church families to attend a day where we will honestly, prayerfully and deliberately offer to God all our failings, and open ourselves up to opportunities. It will be on **Saturday 17th July**. Put it in your diaries and on your calendars right now. It isn't just for Circuit Meeting representatives. It isn't just for Church Council members. It's for all of us. If you want your congregation to be part of the future, it needs to be represented.

This is a chance for each one of us to be part of a new future, one focussed on God's love and compassion for all creation; one that recognises that, as Church, we are about God's business, not our own. Let's stop being JAMs, and start being the people that God calls us to be. Jesus called fishermen, tax collectors, and assortment of professional and trades people, and made them fishers of people. He still calls.....

*Lord, teach me to be generous;
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil, and not to seek for rest;
To labour, and not to ask for reward -
except to know that I am doing your will. — St. Ignatius of Loyola*

As I write, there is still considerable uncertainty about the next stage of the coronavirus roadmap. Please continue to take care. Be responsible in your actions, and careful in your dealings with others in church, so that we all stay safe.

Every blessing.

Love

Andrew

Rev Andrew Mumford

Superintendent Minister

Falmouth and Gwennap Methodist Circuit