

Meeting at Derby Methodist Mission

19th October 2011

As usual this report is based on my handwritten notes. Please let me know of any errors or misrepresentations. Ken Tait (kenneth.tait@btinternet.com)

Introduction

The meeting was attended by over 20 people mainly from the Midlands area. Martin Turner (Westminster) as acting Coordinator opened the meeting with a bible reading (Luke 19:41 where Jesus weeps of the city). Martin mentioned that cities have moved up the agenda and asked: What is Methodism's agenda. MCCN should help. We do not find time (in our busy lives) to weep over our cities and he prayed that we might have a heart for our cities.

The Derby Story – Paula Hunt

Queens Hall was built to be a conventional Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1861 – designated as a city centre mission in 1927, when the large Hall was added. The premises are now in need of much attention, they are expensive to heat and difficult to share because of poor sound-proofing.

The area around the church has changed several times. Originally the church served the railway workers and their families who lived in cottages. When these were demolished light industries moved in. Now there is an area of nine acres (serving as car parks) awaiting the fulfilment of the current city development plan.

Many of the members regard the church as their family church, but a few do understand the role of the City Mission, and have a vision for the future. The Development Company responsible for implementing the city's Development Plan would like there to be a significant building at the city centre end of the 'pedestrian boulevard' which is planned to run from the railway station to the city centre. The Development Company are encouraging, and open to the idea of the City Centre Mission occupying the landmark building, but at the moment can't say that they would like us to be there in preference to the other interested party. The building might be eight storeys and one possibility is that the church would occupy the first four floors and the other four would be leased commercially to fund both the development of the building and provide income for the future. The immediate difficulty is that the building will not be completed for five years and Queen's Hall will run out of money in a year and a half. Income is down from rents and the tenant organisations – in the present economic climate – cannot afford to pay any more.

The people of Queen's Hall are enthusiastic about the project. They understand the need for a building that is fit-for-purpose and cheaper to run and maintain. However, 20% are over 80 years old and 10% over 90. Their vision is for a neighbourhood church the 'will see me out'. Neither the circuit (23 churches) nor the Nottingham and Derby district seem to embrace the vision. City centre ministry is seen as expensive and not as an 'engine for mission' that deserves wider ownership. The local city centre ecumenical groups are not really active.

Questions and comments

I have a feeling there were questions and comments but my notes don't make it clear and I may have included what was said in the above – KT

The Nottingham Story – Kevin Dunn and Peter Willis

[Someone else contributed and I did not make a note of his name.]

Kevin, an apprentice at Life@theCentre (Nottingham Methodist Mission), introduced a video¹ that collected together various clips with words, pictures and music that brought together ideas that he and others felt expressed their spiritual vision.

Peter spoke about the foundation elements that drove Life@theCentre. They are on a journey, like Abraham rather than Solomon, with no clear destination, travelling across an uncertain seascape not a landscape. Cities are dynamic living organisms, not fixed concrete, bricks and mortar. The centre of a city moves over time. Having a presence in the city centre means having a fluid presence – working out of ‘tents’ rather than buildings. Engaging in mission is to be a pioneer not a settler, or, as the Bible has it, sojourners – temporary residents. In the gospels many things happened on the way from one place to the next, while travelling light. Having a building makes it difficult to travel. He urged us to be soaring eagles, not parrots weighed down by things that are not part of mission, trammelled by procedures and practices. We should be able to say that we have no place to lay our heads. This way of ministry and mission is risky. There is no security.

At Nottingham the building is pretty good, but it is not fit-for-purpose. They may stay, they may not. The building is not financially sustainable. Could they use premises in the retail area? The model will not be (should not be) have a building to earn money to finance the ministry. They are asked how will people know where you are? – a good question. Where is your congregation? Membership is not what’s important, the church is a body of people. At Christ’s crucifixion the temple curtain was torn in two removing the distinction between priest and people. We need to discover the vitality of the people of God and have a theology that addresses the new covenant in which all are ministers rather than the old.

Does this seem airy-fairy? Lacking substance? As a cell church, people meet in various places: Starbucks, pubs, homes, and as part of other activities football, badminton and the like. The church is a network of meetings, gatherings and encounters to which others can be easily invited, people who might not find traditional church congenial.

Over recent years the age of the congregation has halved and there has been a focus on retail and prison ministry and working with the young and LGTB (Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual and Bisexual). They have been approached (because of this ministry) by other organisations to provide support for those abusing alcohol, drugs and other substances.

Questions and comments

- Do we need a building to worship in?
- Don’t need all the buildings. People could be brought together into one building for stunning worship. Worship is at the heart of ministry and mission.
- The error is to make the building the foundation.

The Leicester Story – Jill Marsh

The Leicester Methodist Mission (Bishop Street) occupies buildings that date from 1815 and now looks out on to the Town Hall Square. The retail focus of the city has moved away from Bishop Street in recent years. The interior of the main building is in the preaching house style and in 1970 a wall was erected at the back of the congregation to create a larger foyer area.

The people of Bishop Street are more racially diverse than most church congregations. They are people who feel they fit in. Many live in rented accommodation and change addresses more frequently than most. Bishop Street is a place where they feel they belong. Many of those who have joined the congregation in recent years are ‘transfer’ rather than ‘growth’ coming from other churches many from other countries such as Ghana or Zimbabwe. Such people challenge us. Jill has taken on a student chaplaincy role at the two universities (Leicester and De Montfort). The students don’t often come on a Sunday morning but they do come to a Sunday evening group, and

¹ This can be obtained from [Life@theCentre](#). The group also handed out some information packs.

to some lunches. There are increasing numbers of small children. A group of qualified Boys' Brigade leaders would like to start a Boys' Brigade but at the moment have few takers.

Bishop Street is in one of the three Leicester circuits. This raises problems. The circuit to which Bishop Street belongs does not recognise that city centre work is expensive but rather see it as having an income from rents. The other two circuits do not see the city centre work as their responsibility.

A piecemeal approach is being taken to the improvement of the building, to create hospitable spaces. Insulation has been laid in the roof space. The dividing wall is to be removed so that on entering people step straight into the church. The fixed pews are (at little or no cost) being made both smaller and movable to give flexibility to the worship space. There will soon be disabled access. The challenge is to respond to those around and the church has accepted the challenge of staying where it is.

Bishop Street holds many events which bring people into the building and others that take place in Town Hall Square. Pop-in on Friday is for older people. The Bridge is for the homeless not all of whom are actually homeless and many see this as 'home'. Last year a Christmas Crib Festival created a display of Nativity scenes in various styles from all over the world. On Remembrance Day the church was decorated with Cranes of Peace made by different people from the groups meeting in the church. Some display boards (obtained from St Paul's Cathedral at no cost except transport) have made it possible to have displays of art and there have been a number of thought-provoking exhibitions. The display space is offered to charities. Bishop Street has been involved in the annual passion play, and has dared to read the gospel of Mark aloud in a nearby restaurant. The aim of all these activities is to proclaim the gospel through being a participative community.

Questions and comments

- Some suburban churches are cosy and inward looking.
- We need churches of all kinds
- Bishop Street is confident in what is offered
- City centre churches should model excellence
- Can be messy when being excellent conflicts with affirmation of a person who wants to participate