

SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER'S LETTER

Dear Friends

It is probably simplistic to divide it like this but it seems to me as if in the first half of my life most of the controversy in the church was over doctrinal matters and in the second half of my life most of the controversy in the church is over ethical matters. For want of an easy way to divide the two, doctrinal matters concern what we believe and ethical matters concern how we live – there is an obvious interplay between the two of course. For 10 years I was part of a team researching into trends in the contemporary church with the University of Wales. That was 15-25 years ago now but at the time an unexpected trend was revealed in the ministry of the Methodist Church. Our ministers were becoming doctrinally more conservative and ethically more liberal. Consequently, a far higher percentage of younger ministers affirmed the fundamental statements of the creed and were more likely to put a literal interpretation on the Scriptural texts – e.g. Jesus did actually multiply the five loaves and two fish into sufficient food to feed 5,000 men, and the women and children with them, and not just enable the boy's offering to be an inspirational example of sharing – but were less likely to hold traditional views about such issues as marriage and human relationships.

In this coming quarter, our Plymouth & Exeter Methodist District Synod will have to take recorded votes on the Methodist Conference report, God in Love Unites Us, which concerns marriage and human relationships. This is a vote that I wish we did not need to have for, despite the optimistic title, I think the report will divide us. In my childhood and teenage years, I remember people at my church having vigorous debates (arguments!) about creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus, the historicity of miracles and even of the resurrection. After an interlude of debate about baptism and spiritual gifts, hymns or worship songs, the focus of controversy in the Methodist Church (and not the Methodist Church alone) is now about same-sex marriage, relationships and cohabitation. While these are clearly ethical matters, concerning what the church teaches about the right way to live, these obviously give an indication as to what we believe, not only about marriage and human relationships but also about the place of Scriptural teaching in the church. Synod votes will be reported to the Methodist Conference but are by no means a referendum. They just reflect the mood of the church at District level. Disappointingly, we were not asked to take a vote among members, Church Councils or Circuit Meetings. A final decision will be made by 2 July. The Methodist Conference decision will have an impact on the life of our churches, our members and ministers, and on both the worldwide church and wider society.

For more than 30 years, Methodist ministers have been entitled to sabbatical leave and more recently this has become compulsory. I am taking some sabbatical leave this year in two parts. In the first, I shall be sharing with a Christian community in Petrópolis, Brazil, and in the second I hope to be alongside some Methodist congregations in Poland. I am grateful to Revd Doug Rix, my supernumerary colleagues and the circuit leadership team for their support and to Jenny Page in the circuit office for keeping everything running smoothly.

God bless

John Haley