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*St Albans and Welwyn Circuit, Beds, Essex and Herts District*

Minister: Rev Andrew Prout, 16 Gainsborough Avenue, St Albans, Herts AL1 4NL | 01727 851834

Minutes: Church Council, Tuesday 22nd September 2020 7.45pm via Zoom

***Our Calling*** *in the Methodist church is to increase awareness of God’s presence and to celebrate God’s love. Help people to learn and grow as Christians, through mutual support and care. Be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice and make more followers of Jesus Christ. At Hatfield Road Methodist Church we work out this calling through our adopted statements of purpose, mission and vision, and annual intention.*

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| **1** | **Welcome and Apologies / Zoom and Meeting Protocols / Opening Devotions**  Present: Rev Andrew Prout (AP), Angela Spriggs (AS, note taker), Joe Kinchenton (JK), Joanna Rose (JR), Val Parker (VP), Chris Hancock (CH), Ros Hancock (RH), Eric Bridgstock (EB), Denise Willingham (DW), Chris Kitchin (CK), Angela Andrews (AA), Peter Wallace (PW), Lianne Weidmann (LW), Stuart Johnson (SJ)  Apologies received from: Gina Woodhead, Rev Rosemary Fletcher, Caroline Tough, Graham Danbury, Freda Gray |
| **2** | **Minutes of Church Council 030920 and any Matters Arising**  The minutes from the meeting on 3 September 2020 were approved.  Update on Re-Opening and Re-Start of Morning Services  AP reported that the church had been open on 3 Sundays. Attendance had been around 20 for both the 9 and 10.30 services. All has been working well under COVID precautions. The COVID group had met that morning (22 September). The Harvest Festival was planned for 4th October. The notice sheet would provide instructions on how make donations money and food.  Sunday club was due to start on 11 October.  The risk assessment for Boys Brigade and Girls Brigade has been received from Lesley Saunders and Helen Jeffery. This would be reviewed by the COVID group before sending off to HQ. Girls Brigade and Boys Brigade looked to start at the end of October.  There had been feedback from Circuit questionnaires which will inform Worship Consultation planning.  AP has received a letter from Sue Davey, in which she expressed deep gratitude for all the support she and Alan had received ahead of and after surgery. Alan Davey is now at home and embarking on weeks of recovery. Sue Davey stated that, after much prayerful consideration, she felt she must relinquish her place on Council due to lack of physical access to meetings during the COVID-19 restrictions and also their personal situation. Sue Davey expressed the hope to attend as an observer in future and stated that she would continue to serve on the Property Committee.  AS agreed to send a letter of acknowledgement and thanks for service on the Council on its behalf.  AP reported that Rev Tony Hurle, vicar of St Pauls, was retiring after 28 years. A farewell Zoom service was planned for Sat 3 October 2 o’clock. AP said that he would circulate the link. He would be attending the service and also take an opportunity to say personal farewells after the service on behalf of HRMC. AP proposed to send a letter to Rev Tony Hurle on behalf of HRMC, to wish him well. This was endorsed by the Church Council.  It was proposed that the next Church Council meeting was put back to 2nd November, to allow more time for preparation of paperwork, end of year accounts, reports, pending proposals for heating and boiler repairs and reports from the Lay Worker Management Committee. The HRMC policy documents will also be adopted at this meeting. The Council agreed.  Dates for future Church Council meetings were provisionally set for Feb 16 and June 16 2021. The AGM was set for 16 May 2021 |
| **7** | **The Way Forward Document and Proposals**  Introduction of issues  The Church Council discussed the Circuit ‘Way Forward’ proposals. AP noted the pre-circulated Way Forward documents prepared by the Circuit Leadership Team. He summarised the main points. He noted that the documents make clear the need for a reduction in ministerial staff in 2022. Rev Rosemary Fletcher is due to retire and there is a possibility that Deacon Linda Kinchenton and Rev Ali Facey may move, although the last two are both able to seek an extension. The staff reduction is necessary because of falling membership across the Circuit. Several churches are struggling, both financially, and in having necessary officers to run churches and fill all preaching engagements. Personal giving has increased in some churches, but the pressures are such that the Circuit cannot sustain 5 full-time ministerial staff from 2022.  AP stated that at the current Church Council meeting there was need for one immediate decision: whether the Council accepted the proposal to reduce the ministerial staff from 5 to 4 in 2022, comprising 3 presbyters and 1 deacon.  CK noted for the record that he thought that the Circuit meeting had already decided to reduce its staffing from 5 to 4? AP clarified that the Circuit meeting had previously decided that it would move to reduce ministerial staffing from 5 to 4 unless there was a clear response in terms of financial giving. Despite some increases, including from members of HRMC, the amount has been insufficient. Therefore the Circuit wishes to confirm its decision to reduce from 5 to 4 ministerial staff at its next meeting.  CK asked whether the members of the Circuit Leadership Team (CLT) were of one mind on the Way Forward, and if so, what this position was.  AP stated that there were different views expressed within the leadership team, but the document presents a consensus view. By contrast PW did not feel that the document represented a consensus. He noted a hard deadline for decisions in June 2021 when profiles have to be written for future ministers. AP noted that one of the changes made to the Way Forward document since last circulated in early Spring was to give the churches until the end of February to look at the detail around staffing, its future mission and proposed management models. DW highlighted that there was little choice to retain current numbers because of financial constraints and a lack of presbyters available in the Connexion.  AP set out the financial projection within the Circuit. He noted considerable falling membership in Circuit churches, except HRMC until this year. Many churches had no or minimal reserves and no or very limited capacity to raise further monies.  Impact of the proposals on HRMC  AP introduced a discussion on the impact of the Way Forward proposals on HRMC. He described the two alternative models set out in the documents. One was a geographical split where one presbyter would have single oversight for HRMC and MRMC, supported by the two incumbent lay workers and with an element of deacon’s time. In the other model each of the three presbyters took responsibility for one big church in the Circuit and some smaller ones (such that HRMC and MRMC would have different presbyters). He noted the favoured option was for a geographical split. AP personally anticipated that the required element of the deacon’s time would be substantial, and he felt that HRMC’s response should say that. He also noted that the document stated that, subject to finances, there might be capacity for employment of lay staff to provide administrative support.  Responsibilities of a deacon  Following a preceding question from Joanna Rose, AP described the roles and responsibilities of a deacon within the Methodist Church.He noted that the role is rooted in the Acts of the Apostles assisting in distribution of goods to the poor. Within the Methodist Church there is a strong emphasis on a deacon being present in and reaching out to the community. Deacons: make visible God’s calling to the church to be a servant in the world; seek out the lost and lonely; help those they serve to offer their lives to God; bring the gospel to those people in the community, drawing them into wider fellowship of the church; constantly hold the needs of the community and the concerns of the world before the church; and exercise preaching ministry. Some deacons in the Methodist Church have a specific focus such as a chaplaincy. Some are pioneer ministers where their work is completely separated from the traditional church, for example working in the digital space, working with particular groups or particular demographics absent from the church life. Often they seek to work alongside the poor and socially vulnerable people in the community, who might struggle to make their way through the church door. Within the Methodist Church they are part of religious order, committed to daily prayer and fellowship, and meet with fellow deacons. Any appointment must be approved by the Methodist diaconal order.  AP described how the deacon might support the work at HRMC and MRMC. At HRMC there was scope for engagement with groups meeting at the church such as the Aldersgate Café, Babies and Toddlers, and Al Anon, and with Fleetville organisations such as the Morrison’s Chaplaincy, Sitting Room, and local traders on the main street. AP currently supported these activities to varying degrees. In central St Albans the deacon could be involved with the Winter Beds project. This is currently supported by Rev Rosemary Fletcher.  AP contrasted the role of the deacon with that of the lay worker or lay pastor. With the latter there was a specific job description and tasks. By contrast the deacon must work within the remit of community-based work. RH noted that once appointed a deacon has more personal control in how they develop their work, where a lay worker could be much more directed. A lay pastor would provide more flexibility to church(es) to direct their work than a deacon once in post. RH stated that the diaconate would also choose where a deacon goes. AP noted that the Circuit would submit the profile of what they wanted from a deacon, and the diaconate would appoint the person with the gifts and the grace to fit that profile. There would be less flexibility for change. There are about 120 active deacons.  AP compared the diaconal role with that of a presbyter, emphasising the deacon’s explicit community focus. Work such as leading house groups and chairing Church Councils fall outside the deacon’s model. Deacons do not preside at Communion. It was acknowledged that Rev Linda Kinchenton had had to carry more of the presbyteral burden than would normally be expected of a deacon during her time in the Circuit because of presbyteral ill-health. It is important that, moving forward, the deacon’s role becomes more normalised towards the community role. RH noted that when a Circuit applies to the Diaconate for a deacon, the Circuit has to state what it wants the deacon to do, and the Diaconate would only consider such an allocation if the required duties are commensurate with that of a deacon. She also noted that a deacon is allocated, so the Circuit would not know whether the deacon was able to do more presbyterial work before they arrived.  AP noted that a deacon could carry out weddings, baptisms and funerals, and also Messy Church, where the request for these services come from members of the community. He noted that most probably a third of the funerals he currently conducted were from outside the congregation. There was therefore scope to support some of his presbyterial work. RH noted that the baptisms, weddings and funerals could also be carried out by lay workers.  CH noted that in fact the proposed future staffing model presented by the Circuit represented 3 members of staff and one missional post, and not 4 members of staff.  DW noted that it was not clear how having a deacon assists in covering presbyteral work.  DW emphasised that the lay workers recently being employed by HRMC and MRMC will not to be counted as part of the Circuit Staff. Their duties concerned new work. Some grants for the Children and Families worker were given on the basis that the Children and Families worker should not be doing any of the work of a presbyter and if they found out that this were happening, the grant would be stopped. She noted the apparent similarity with the deacon’s role.  The Council discussed a range of possible options and issues including:   * The need to identify the best support for AP / a joint minister of HRMC and MRMC in their work. JR noted that the initial discussions about the Circuit’s and church’s needs occurred before lay workers were appointed and HRMC’s support needs may have changed. It may be that the main support needed now was for work covered by AP. EB asked AP whether he felt it was feasible to hold down a role covering 2 large churches, with deacon support and lay worker. AP stated that it could only work if there was support alongside, including Children and Families worker, Anna Chaplain, and other support, whether this be a lay worker, deacon, administrative support, bursars, or a combination thereof. He stated that if he saw the post in profiling, consisting of two large churches, without support he would not be enticed to fill it, compared with other appointments. He stated that the Circuit would have to seriously consider what ministerial support is needed. DW noted that the HRMC minister had had administrative support in the past. * The need to provide sufficient support to the staff at HRMC and MRMC to enable growth. AP summarised the data on the size of membership that each presbyter in the Circuit would support if the geographical model were chosen. Research has shown that when the Congregation reaches a certain size relative to the presbytery it is very difficult to grow further without appropriate resources. For instance, Harpenden Methodist Church, with a 300-400 plus membership, has a presbyter, deacon, and a lay worker. It would be difficult to manage church without the lay worker. * Potential for employment of a part time presbyter, sharing with a neighbouring Circuit (VP). AP noted that may be a smaller pool of people available for part time ministry. CK noted that there were many examples of part time presbyters looking after churches, and also chaplains, for example where ministers had been off sick, or in retirement. * That many different potential models of part time presbytery and other support roles could be considered, including administrative or bursar-type support (CK) * The need for each church, including HRMC, to put forward a growth plan for their ministry over the next few years, and to determine what support we would need to bring this into fruition (PW and DW). PW mooted that this could be led by the stewards. It was noted that this work had been carried out as part of preparation for employment of the Anna Chaplain and the Children and Families worker (JR and DW). DW noted that this exercise also needed input from the congregation. * That the changes in the Circuit offered an exciting opportunity to try something different (CK and DW). * The need to identify what work did and did not need to be done if staff levels are being reduced, eg reducing the number of Church Councils for smaller churches (DW and CT). * PW noted pressure on St Albans to MRMC and HRMC to have one Church Council, but felt that this should be resisted. Joined working should happen organically. * The need to take into account the Circuit’s mission strategy in deciding the best way forward. The Circuit may have a different model than supporting a presbyter; for instance they may be trying to release ministers of their administrative burden. PW noted that the Circuit’s immediate mission was in part to consider the impact of staff reduction on the distribution of its resources to cover Circuit’s obligations such as Communion. Each presbyter will face a 25% increase in communion services for instance.   Proposals for future consultation on the Way Forward  Prompted by an email from CT, AP set out intentions to incorporate feedback on the Way Forward proposals from the wider congregation:   * Consultation would be widened once the Circuit has voted on the decision to reduce staffing numbers from 5 to 4 at its meeting on 14 October. He proposed that the Way Forward documents could be circulated, with a description of a deacon’s role and examples of pieces of work a deacon could do. * HRMC would need to have completed consultations by the end of February to allow discussions to be with the Circuit meeting in March. The congregation would be consulted from mid-October, requesting responses by mid-November. AP proposed that AP, AS, DW would pull all thoughts and ideas together. * RH proposed that some discussions should take place with MRMC given that HRMC may be sharing a minister with MRMC. * It was proposed that consultation and dialogue was established between the different churches in the Circuit as well as with MRMC. * CK noted that all churches in the Circuit should have the same information about the distinctions between the roles of a deacon, lay pastor, presbyters, if they are making the same decisions. He noted with concern the lack of information provided in the report about these differences. * DW noted the need to get stewards from HR and MR together again fairly soon. * CK asked whether any consideration had been given to merging with another Circuit, given that the Circuit was relatively small. AP stated that the CLT did meet with District Chair, who concluded that little would be gained from merging with another Circuit. * DW proposed that the Council carried out consultations through Zoom rooms and potentially garden visits. RH noted that such as Zoom room conversations would facilitate free thinking. It was agreed that responses to questionnaires had been disappointing.   The Church Council discussed its response to the proposals set out by the Circuit’s Way Forward document.  The Council voted that it supported the proposal of reducing the ministerial staff in the Circuit from 5 to 4 in 2022. 12 supportive, 1 against.  The Church Council’s views were as summarised in the paragraph below, which was subsequently agreed by AP, DW and AS and submitted to the Circuit Leadership Team on 28 September:  ‘The Council of Hatfield Road Methodist Church accepts the principle that the St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield Circuit should decrease its staff from five to four in 2022, but does not necessarily agree that these four staff should comprise three presbyters and one deacon. The various options need further discussion and the Church Council will report its thoughts on these in March 2021.  The Church Council is not persuaded one way or the other as to the preferred model of the Circuit (Option 1 or 2) without further thinking and consultation.  It will provide an opportunity for feedback from the wider congregation and engage in conversations with Marlborough Road Methodist Church. However, if Option 1 is chosen (where both St Albans churches share a presbyter), the Church Council submits that the presbyter will need support. The Council will continue to consider the best form of support over the next four months,whether this be administrative, diaconal or by a part time presbyter or lay worker or any combination thereof. The Church Council also submits that dialogue between all churches in the Circuit would be beneficial during this time’. |
| **9.** | **Dates of future meetings**  Church Council – Monday **2nd November next meeting.** |
| **10** | **Closing Devotions** |