



## ***Navigating Change*** ***A conference for Methodist Leaders and Leadership Teams to explore and encourage Church Growth.***

In October a small group from the Leadership Team attended an inspiring and encouraging conference called Navigating Change. The conference was hosted and organized by Swan Bank Centre which is a large Methodist Church in Stoke upon Trent. Gail, David, Sue and Simon attended on behalf of our church and heard from a wide variety of speakers.

There were more than 200 people at the event, drawn from churches, chapels and circuits from around the UK. Some were representing very small congregations, struggling to manage declining membership but others were from very large, growing churches. Gracious Street would fit somewhere towards the middle – a medium to large church experiencing growth and a lot of community interaction. Three of the things that all the attendees had in common was a passion for mission, an ambition for their church and a recognition that we are living through a period of unprecedented change.



There are so many negative messages in the media and sometimes even within the Methodist church family that suggest decline is inevitable. However, the conference opened with a very strong rejection of this view and placed the focus clearly on the need for faith, mission and growth.

Of course there was also recognition that the pace of change we are currently experiencing in society is a real challenge. There is a temptation to try and keep things as they always have been since this can feel comfortable and reassuring. Unfortunately, looking only to the past means trying to live in a world that no longer exists. Here at Gracious Street we are alive to this challenge and the Leadership Team has been working hard on our approaches to Mission and Communication. It was really encouraging to hear others recognize the issue as a very real one and share views on how to move forwards in faith without leaving anyone behind.



Along with some fabulous worship sessions, there was some very interesting feedback presented by the team that has recently completed a very large survey called “Talking Jesus – Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and evangelism in England”. You may have seen references to this in the media before Christmas and there is a lot of information and data readily available at [www.talkingjesus.org](http://www.talkingjesus.org). What we took away from the presentation is that, whilst a lot of people are uncertain about who Jesus was and what our faith means, at least one in five people are very open to a conversation about him. This means that we

need to work hard at engaging with our community and making the distance from the pavement to the pew as short as possible but in so doing we should be encouraged – by far the most common reason for people coming to faith was found to be a conversation with a Christian friend.

There were a number of elective sessions so in order to cover everything we wanted to join in with it was necessary for us to split up and attend various sessions separately.



Simon spent some time with Mike Rayson, a Pastor from St. Louis who shared some incredible lessons about dealing with difficult change. He talked about huge challenges with racism, corruption even death threats. Thankfully we don't have to deal with anything that dramatic at Gracious Street but the way he responded was really interesting.

He focused on serving the community in the present and pointed out that Jesus was a fabulous communicator who used very contemporary images that were highly relevant to his audience 2000 years ago. We should, therefore, follow his lead and use contemporary communication styles and references to share the Gospel with our communities today.

Sue attended a seminar about the church exploring Radical hospitality and Inderjit Bhogal spoke about hospitality revealing the heart of God and that, as God's people, we are called to spread out the feast. The Christian faith is rooted in hospitality and Jesus is the host; a truth that reinforces our need to love our neighbour whoever they may be. The seminar challenged people to see the face of God in those who are different and ensure that everything about our being and our buildings should simply say "we believe in Jesus you are welcome".



Gail explored the centrality of worship within growing churches. One of the main messages was that a worshipping community should be a place where people can relate, love and be loved. Those involved in leading and enabling worship need to be generous with their time, skills and preparation and, of course, be open to the Spirit's movement. There was also a call for leaders of worship to be courageous in pushing the boundaries and seeking God's best. The choice of hymns and songs should promote good theology using accessible language and music. It was also noted that there should be continuity of leadership in worship and the willingness to create a community that is open to all ages and levels.

An interesting point was made that worship groups and bands have been identified as a helpful way to bring people into faith. People are invited come and join the group and it is here their gifts are used and enjoyed, worship experienced, relationships built and discipleship explored.

David and Simon also attended a session on Leadership Structures for a growing Methodist church. Rather than being dry and technical, it was actually a really affirmative discussion that showed us that the changes we have made here at Gracious Street are far from unique. Actually our approach to Church Council,

leadership team, stewards and groups was replicated in a number of the larger churches that were talking about their recent experiences. Certainly there is nothing for us to be complacent about but it was great to hear that others have independently reached the same conclusions as us!

It was clear to those who attended, that we must be continually thinking ahead. Not only about the next step, but also the one after that and plan what needs to happen for that to become a reality.

Overall, the Navigating Change conference should give us great grounds for optimism but leave us in no doubt that we have a big challenge ahead. Reaching out to our community, being relevant to the world we live in today and ensuring we are consistent, faithful and ambitious for growth will keep us moving in the right direction and allow us to serve God as effectively as we can here in Knaresborough.