

SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER'S LETTER

Dear Friends

My wife and I have recently returned from our first visit to New Zealand where our daughter and grandson have lived for the last 16 years. To break the long journeys, we also had five nights in Singapore. One of the things I enjoy about holidays is sitting in the congregation and we were able to do that at four quite different churches.

In Singapore we were greeted by Mr Charis Lim, who was at Wesley House, Cambridge, with my friends Revd David Hull and Revd Jerry Cook. There are 44 Methodist Churches in Singapore which, with a population of about 5 million, is a country with a similar population to Scotland on an island similar in size to the Isle of Man. We went with Charis, his wife and their two children to the 11.30 am service at Wesley Methodist Church (there were morning services at other times). One of the challenges the church faces is that its buildings are too small for all the people who want to attend and, with little possibility of extending the buildings, the church hires whatever premises it can, including a cinema, and provides live worship at each venue (we were in a contemporary service, with a worship band and modern songs) but links the preacher to all the centres on big screens. I asked Charis, 'how many people do you think will have been at the various services this morning?' He replied, 'about 5,000!' And that's just one church from 44.

After the hustle and bustle of Singapore, even Wellington, New Zealand's second largest city with a population of over 400,000, seemed tranquil. We attended two churches in Wellington. The first, a Free Church, was welcoming with traditional worship, but a largely older congregation. The minister preached well but I wasn't quite sure of something that I will explain in conclusion. The second, City on a Hill Church, was flourishing. Although numbers attending were almost inevitably smaller, the church did remind me of the Wesley Methodist Church in Singapore in terms of worship style and the average age of the congregation.

Lastly, on a visit to see the oldest church building in Singapore (the Armenian Church), we came across a congregation of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria (this is an ancient Egyptian Church that separated from the main body of Christendom in A.D. 451, after quite difficult-to-follow theological differences at the Council of Chalcedon). Most of the order of service was projected bilingually, so that we could follow the order of worship in English. Apart from the priest, I think we were the oldest people in the service, albeit that the congregation was probably only about 30 people. The singing was inaccessible to us, but there were many Scripture readings and the priest spoke well about Jesus, his death on the cross and the promise of resurrection life.

We were warmly welcomed in all four congregations, the ministers spoke well in each church, the music in each of the churches was well done, so why did I have a reservation about the Free Church (I am being purposely vague about its identity) in Wellington? I think, in short, that I felt that it did not demonstrate a clear understanding of its own purpose, its ethos, its identity and it did not seem to have a vision for its future direction. Consequently, its energies seemed to be focused on the building and on its friendly welcome – to be fair it was a lovely building and the people were very friendly. It brought to mind the question that I have often asked as a new minister in Methodist Church councils – what sort of church do you aspire to be? As I write this letter in the quarterly plan, I hope that it is read by ministers, local preachers, church stewards, members of church councils and people who hold all kinds of different offices. Keeping the building going and being friendly are not really satisfactory answers to the question, 'what sort of church do you aspire to be?' Can I encourage each of our eight church councils to wrestle with that question?

Many of our members will already know that Revd Jon Doble's request to leave the circuit was agreed both by the invitation committee and the circuit meeting. Jon continues to be a Methodist Minister in good standing with the church. We wish him well for the future, as he seeks new opportunities in which to exercise his ministry. Revd Ruth Whitehead, the URC Moderator, has indicated that the URC hope to find a new minister for Central. We trust that the right minister will become available and await further news.

God bless

John Haley