**Synod Highlights**

The Representative Synod of the East Anglia District met at Huntingdon Methodist Church, hosted by the St Neots & Huntingdon Circuit. It was largely in person but around 20 people joined by Zoom. The theme of Synod was “**Worship and Celebration**”. Rev Dr Julian Pursehouse, District Chair, welcomed everyone to Synod and shared greetings from the Bishop of the Harare West District in Zimbabwe from where Julian and three others had just returned from a visit.

Our opening worship was led by the Staff team of the St Neots & Huntingdon Circuit. The first reading was from Acts 1 v15-17 and 21-26 and Rev Sue Baker-Maher’s reflection said it was all about filling the top team. She referred to the fact that we were celebrating the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women presbyters and that in this reading they were looking for someone who had been with Jesus during his ministry but unfortunately Mary Magdalene did not make the short list. In our second reading from Corinthians 15 v1-9 she said Paul was equally absent minded! Therefore to give us biblical guidance from a woman she needed to turn to Esther who, like us, lived in liminal times. To save her people from annihilation Esther researched and asked questions, listened to different viewpoints to understand her context, reflected and prayed, and used the power she had within limited boundaries. There are lessons for the church to learn from this including that we sometimes need to hold space and uncertainty. Rev James Bamber referred to the postcard we had all been given relating to Jubilee and all the R’s including the key word of reset. We sang several hymns. Julian thanked Huntingdon for the joyful and thought provoking worship

The list of dispensations was read out and it was agreed to send letters to various people. Julian congratulated Rev Jonny Bell who had been recommended by the Districts Probationers’ Group to go to Conference for ordination. This had also been endorsed in the Presbyteral Session of Synod. Jonny’s Testimony Service would be held on 15 June at Holt at 3pm. Julian said next year Rev Judith Bell would hopefully be ordained and a new probationer, Rev Laura Martin, would be joining us in the Ely & Newmarket Circuit in September 2024.

Reports from District Committees were received as written. These provided a whole spectrum of information. Rev Andrew King, on behalf of the District Treasurer (who was on Zoom), presented the accounts. These were formally moved and approved by Synod.

The **Resolution** relating to the reconstitution of St Peter’s Park Lane Church Council was projected on the screen. Andrew explained the situation. A legacy had been left to St Peter’s Park Lane Methodist Church which had closed and merged with St Peter’s Jessopp Road URC. It had therefore been necessary for St Peter’s Park Lane Church Council to be reconstituted in order for the legacy to be split between the Church, Circuit and District. The reconstitution had been approved by the Norwich Circuit and the Resolution before Synod needed to also be approved. Getting to this situation had involved long and detailed conversations with TMCP so the resources could be used for mission. The Resolution was proposed by Rev Andrew King, seconded by Susan Eldridge and approved by Synod. It was suggested that it would be helpful to have information at a later time as to how the legacy had been used in practice. The advice from this experience is that it is better to not leave a legacy to a specific church without a provision as to what would happen if it had closed.

The draft **appointments** list had been sent to Synod members. This was the last Synod for Susan Eldridge in the role of Synod Secretary. Chris Finbow was appointed as Synod Secretary and Judy Read as Assistant Synod Secretary from September 2024. Synod formally agreed Rev Andrew King and Rev James Bamber as Deputy District Chairs for the forthcoming year.

There was a proposed **Memorial to Conference** presented by Rev Robert Ely, Ely & Newmarket Circuit. The text was projected on the screen and Robert read it out. He referred to his daughter being an Aid Worker and that she was in the area. This gave him, and his wife Teresa, a particular concern for the region, especially Gaza. The Memorial deplored the actions of Hamas and the ongoing response of the Israeli Defence Force and the resulting human consequences. Conversation was invited. The Memorial was welcomed by some and suggestions for improvement were made by others. Some felt there were other areas with similar human suffering.

Julian expressed gratitude for the care and concern expressed and suggested that the wording was refined over lunch and brought back to Synod in the afternoon. Robert said he was in broad agreement with what had been said. The wording was refined over lunch and included a request for Conference to add its voice to those urging an immediate ceasefire and those requesting the UK to cease all arms supplies to the region and encourage prayer for justice and peace in the region. A vote was taken and the Memorial was carried.

Julian said he had chosen to mark the **50th anniversary of the ordination of women presbyters** at Representative Synod with everyone present. The video was introduced by Rev Charity Nzegwu who said it was a great privilege to celebrate this anniversary and thanked Jenna Thorne (Learning Network) for putting the video together and the Synod Secretary for the guidance given. It was mentioned that the ordination of Deaconesses had been from an earlier date and their much longer struggle should be honoured. Reference was made to a Connexional video on YouTube on the 50th anniversary which people might like to watch. The inclusion of women represented being faithful to the gospel and the mission of Christ. We gave thanks to those whose shoulders we stand on today. Charity recognised that there was still much to do so women are given equal opportunities to lead in the Church. Julian referred to the encouraging increase in the number of women District Chairs (and also people with non-white ethnicity) in his time in that role and that we should celebrate this.

The video was a snapshot from women across the District sharing a bit of their story and how they thought it might look in 50 years’ time. It included contributions from Rev Charity Nzegwu, Deacon Lynne Tonge, Rev Rita Carr, Rev Helen Hollands (District Chair designate), Rev Joy Levine (who had started as a Deacon in 1967) and some women ecumenical representatives. In 50 years they hoped to see equality across the board, reference to people in ministry and siblings in Christ and a knowledge that God calls people of every gender. It included Rev Jenny Pathmarajah on the piano, some photos of Rev Judith Bell in ministry and a prayer from Rev Betty Trinder. Conversation from the floor was invited and included that there were still some women not treated as they should be by men and a warning from Rev Debbie Caulk that in the United Methodist Church ordination was taken away from women four times up to 1962. It was also mentioned that in Wesley’s time women were in the pulpit.

Julian said a report was coming to Conference this year suggesting a significant revision to the **stationing process**. It was anticipated that major changes would not be until September 2026. Conference is likely to request consultation with Districts so this would probably come to the Autumn Presbyteral and Representative Synods. Julian urged those who were interested to read the Conference report on the website in due course.

Chris Finbow gave an update on Districts working together. The **East Anglia (EA) / Beds, Essex and Herts (BEH) group** had met twice. The regionalisation aims remain alive and a strategic review in 5 to 10 years would be likely. It was good that we were already having our conversations. We had looked at our staffing/appointments across the two Districts and were talking to each other about any new ones proposed. It is planned for the Superintendents from both Districts to get together later this year for a development meeting. This would be followed by the two District Policy Committees getting together in Spring 2025 and ultimately the Circuit Stewards over Zoom. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) was already being operated across the two Districts. The next meeting for the EA/BEH group would be at the end of May.

Dr Yasmin Finch gave an update on **New Places for New People** (NPNP). This is a Connexional initiative providing money to Districts (with match funding) to plant new Christian communities. We are in tranche 3 and progressing slowly (like growing an oak tree). No funds have been allocated yet. The District Policy Committee will be reflecting later in the year. The NPNP guiding team has been included in the appointments list. It was in the process of doing visits to various places. Yasmin reported that our problem was not our vision but the limited pot of money available. A short trial was about to start at Upwell (with its lovely gardens) operating a forest church. Mundesley would be exploring the possibility of a surf/beach church. Yasmin listed various other areas where NPNP was being explored.

Susan Eldridge, District EDI Officer, referred to her EDI report which showed that the District was progressing well with the EDI training but a few Circuits still had a way to go. She encouraged everyone who was required to do the training to do so as soon as possible as we were well past the Connexional deadline. She encouraged those who had completed the training to start to think about what they would like to do next on their EDI/Justice, Dignity & Solidarity (JDS) journey. She referred to the forthcoming EDI Zooms including the one on 15 May which would include interviews with members of the Norwich Deaf Church which would give a brief insight into church life and worship from the perspective of Deaf people and users of British Sign Language. Bookings were open on Eventbrite and Susan would ask Danielle to circulate the information.

Susan referred to attending an awareness session for EDI Officers on the subject of Language Fellowship Groups. Connexion was trying to obtain information regarding diverse language ministries, congregations and groups in the Methodist Church in Britain. Susan has a form people can fill in if anyone had any that Connexion were not aware of. There was a brief period of discussion on EDI matters including someone asking for a progress report on God in Love Unites Us. This was answered by several people referring to churches that had been solemnised for same sex marriages and that some had taken place. There was a warning that re-solemnisation can take time and to remember that authorised persons also have to re-register. Rev Charity said that EDI is about being human with each other and is part of our discipleship.

We had a period of **information sharing**. The Synod Secretary referred to Grapevine (one paper copy per Church) and that it will be circulated electronically. She gave the dates for 3Generate and reminded Synod that the District will cover the cost. In return it would be great to receive a report or video for September Synod. Susan advised Synod that Danielle had sent round a survey about youth ministry to each Circuit and that responses by 10 May would be appreciated. This will help inform us as to the best way of enabling and supporting this important ministry. A few responses had already been received.

Julian advertised the service at Walsingham Methodist Church on 8 June marking their 230th Anniversary. He urged people to put a visit on their bucket list (it is our oldest Methodist Chapel) and perhaps combine it with a visit to Wighton Heritage Centre. Before we broke for lunch we watched an MHA video about their befriending service.

After lunch we recommenced by singing Brother, Sister, let me serve you and took up an offering to be split between the District Benevolent Fund and All We Can. This raised around £400 (plus a few donations later from the sale of cakes).

Julian led Synod in a **Bible Study**. He read Philippians 1 v1-11. He gave the context for choosing this passage. When the West Harare delegation had visited us at their final farewell at Rev Mary Sachikonye’s house he was dropped upon for a word (as is the African practice) and this reading came to his mind as it talks about partnership in the gospel. Julian shared some reflections from his recent visit to Zimbabwe (there were photos in Grapevine). He preached to over 400 people on this passage. Paul’s relationship with the Philippians was one of deep affection, warmth and loving. Paul referred to deep gratitude, faith, perseverance and support and holding them in his heart. There was no need for Paul to assert or defend his ministry there. Julian talked of faithful, persistent prayer, joyful confidence in the Gospel and God and the importance of gratitude.

He illustrated the above in the context of West Harare. Prayer was said everywhere they went and there was a sense of being held in people’s prayers. One always had to be ready to give a word or a prayer. There was the joy and privilege of prayer. The joyful confidence in the Gospel and God was illustrated in a visit to a very rural Circuit. There was economic depression, crop failure and a state of emergency, with maladministration leading to great pressure. Many Ministers had not been paid for three or four months. The local Church was just a temporary structure. They were praying they would be able to buy a piece of land and construct a church. They believed they would be able to. The language of partnership in the Gospel in Greek is *Koinonia* and includes sharing in fellowship*.* Give thanks for proclamation of the gospel and financial support. Those in West Harare said they had a lot to learn from us but Julian thought we had more to learn from them, including their joyful, exuberant hospitality. We need to remember that when Paul was writing this passage he was in chains.

Julian offered some questions to us and we broke into groups to discuss them (and perhaps also use them later locally). These were:

* What partnerships in the Gospel are evident in the context in which you live and serve? How are these partnerships being nurtured and strengthened?
* In what ways are the following characteristics important to the Church? How often do you witness these characteristics? Persistence and faithful prayer; joyful confidence in the Gospel and the practice of gratitude and thanksgiving.
* What can we learn from our siblings in the world church? In what ways can this kind of partnership enrich us?
* What is your take home thought / question / theme from the Philippian correspondence?

We had a period of **thanks and farewells**. The Synod Secretary was thanked for her 12 years serving the District (the first six being in the Assistant role). Rev Andrew King said she was like a swan (graceful on top but swimming frantically underneath), an amazing proof reader and known for her pastoral concern for people. She was presented with an orchid. George Frost was thanked for his 24 years as District Agricultural Chaplain, supported by his wife Muriel.

Andrew and Rev James Bamber both paid tribute to Julian as he completes his 10 years as our District Chair using their words from the introduction to Grapevine. His Farewell Service on 14 July was advertised where there will be fuller thanks. Farewell was also said to those who will be leaving the District in August. Ann Howlett-Foster (Learning Network) has been a deep friend of the East Anglia District over many years and is ceasing her role so was thanked.

Time defeated us for a full **good news** slot but Aileen Fox shared that Pilgrim Cross (ecumenical group) had asked if they could come to Walsingham Methodist Church. They did this, going round the village singing and then having a service together on the Sunday.

The vote of thanks was given by Rev Robert Roberts. The short closing worship (including Psalm 138) was led by the St Neots & Huntingdon Circuit and was followed by plentiful refreshments before departing.

**Susan Eldridge, Synod Secretary**