

Representative Synod, Spring 2018.

Reimagining church – keynote.

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[Show image of Dagen H – get immediate responses]

This image is of Dagen Högertrafik – the moment on September 3rd 1967 when Sweden changed from driving on the right hand side of the road, to the left.

- A programme which took a decade to get enough support in order to happen
- Included a 4 year, government sponsored, re-education programme, including advertising on milk cartons, an underwear campaign, and a nationwide song contest
- Required the contemporary equivalent of £700 million infrastructural investment, to change everything from traffic lights to switching where bus doors were

But at 5am on 3rd September, every vehicle on the roads stopped, and carefully changed direction. It took six hours to complete. Reports of the day suggested ‘it caused a brief, monumental traffic jam, but Swedish people experienced a revolution for just a few hours which has changed our world for the better and for the good.’

We often say that John Wesley saved the UK from revolution...but I’m becoming more and more alert to the fact that I’m a Methodist because Methodists are revolutionaries – and that today, more than ever – what with declining statistics, and the shameful recognition that at 36, and with 11 years of ministry and 4 years of in-circuit training behind me - I’m still one of the youngest in the room – today I reckon we need a few more revolutionaries.

As we’ve seen in the model of Swedish traffic control, Methodists are revolutionaries who:

- Call people to a change of direction – a re-education of sorts
- Have the potential to change the infrastructure in bold and brave ways - we bend and break some of the rules because we are pragmatists and work out what works by working it out!
- To be single minded in our objective to save the world through relationship rather than buildings.

The heart of the churches vocation is found in the Spirit of God at work in our hamlets, farms, villages, towns, marketplaces, facebook accounts, cities, corporations, conglomerates, franchises, politics, shopping centres and foodbanks...yes, even at work in our chapels.

I believe that now is the time that we are called to change direction. Maybe to repent of the baggage we have tied ourselves up with for far too long. Perhaps to turnaround ailing and ageing congregations who need a party for all their hard work, but loved into kowtowing that enough is enough. And a change of direction so that we are shaped by a vision of God’s future – be that the doomsday scenario of statisticians, or a new heaven and a new earth of Revelation. I’m gunning for the latter...

We are being called to change direction.

This is nothing new – from Exodus to Exile, resurrection to religious persecutions, the Bible shows us a God who calls on the people to change direction and to change the world.

Re-education.

From the decade of evangelism (which turned out to be anything but), to Fresh Expressions – and even the most recent and blistering statement from the World Council of churches about evangelism and mission – the church in my lifetime has been challenged to change direction and to turnaround our practices for the sake of those who do not yet know or follow Jesus.

Now, Methodist publishing have not yet discovered the power of an underwear based campaign for social change – you heard it here first – but my experience across the Connexion is that the message of a change of direction hasn't really got through. I suspect that many of our churches still struggle with the notions that church

- Is primarily a place for those not within our walls, and this is about mission and not being a good landlord
- That mission is about getting out of our buildings, not getting people into them
- That God can turn up at any time in the week, not just at 1030 on a Sunday morning
- Culture and our local contexts are places where the Spirit is active, rather than places to be resisted
- God isn't absent from the world, or our churches, even though we seem to respond atheistically to many a crisis

Even when we sing our theology so boldly, it seems even a singing the faith contest hasn't changed the shape of our worship and discipleship.

I'd like you to imagine a place where people talk about God's presence and God's absence and lost keys and diagnoses and therapy appointments and family and questions; as a natural day to day occurrence, which is honest and full of truth, and no-one feels as though they have to compete. What if we told stories of hope in adversity, the underdog being the chosen one, and stories which live out the reality that the worst thing is never the last thing, because the worst thing can be said out loud.

I'd like you to imagine a place full of questions and conversation. Not easy answers. And a place where we didn't dumb down our theological literacy and instead realised that even the least educated of our people can inform our theology and our understanding. A place where we are hungry for more theology, not less of it.

I'd like you to imagine a place where inclusion is natural, not extraordinary – and where we're done with labels because its people who matter to God.

I'd like you to imagine a place where the worship attendance is bigger than in slimming world because we have something to say about the importance and gift of our bodies – with wrinkles, stretchmarks and scars intact – because our bodies tell our stories as much as our words.

Infrastructural change

We spend so much of our time on our infrastructure – our property, line management, supervision, risk assessing, health and safety and safeguarding – all of which are important features of contemporary living.

But what if we spent at least the same amount of time on our relationships. Our relationships with each other, relationships with strangers and gatekeepers in our local community, and our relationship with God.

I'd like you to imagine a place where people are so at home that jumping on the furniture or running and dancing, is recognised as a natural part of their spiritual development. Where behaviour is about character formation rather than about sitting still. And where adults can run around and jump on furniture if they need to too.

I'd like you to imagine a place where the kettle is always on. Because there's always someone at the door. Where hospitality is radical and means more than dodgy coffee and custard creams served in Berylware.

I'd like you to imagine a place of invitations, open to the most weird as well as the people as weird as us.

I'd like to imagine a place where there's a fight to join the washing up rota – because who doesn't like playing with bubbles? Plus, all the best parties finish in the kitchen.

I'd like you to imagine a place where those under 45 make a majority of the decisions so that we futureproof our legacy rather than preserve our preferences.

What if our decisions were made for the spiritual benefit of my unborn child and their family, rather than to see us through to the next round of assessment bartering.

I'd like you to imagine a place where we commission as many people as social activists as we do Sunday school teachers.

Where vocation and calling means that we see God in the canteen and the post office queue and respond accordingly.

What if creativity is the key to our connectedness, rather than an added extra that is tagged onto worship as an optional extra.

I'd like you to imagine a place where we no longer count because we've realized that counting people and counting the collection are bad measures of social change and world impact.

What happens if our social measure is an indicator of how loving, joyful, patient, peaceful, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self controlled we are...and where these are then influencing other areas of the wider culture.

I'd like you to imagine a place where we are the world leaders in stopping killing the planet. That our buildings become sustainable. That we invest in renewable energy sources, even though it's more expensive. And where we recycle more and throw away less.

It took Sweden 6 hours to change the world – or at least to change direction.
That's the length of time we are at Synod.

May we be the revolutionaries who change the direction of travel, as we notice the Spirit of God calling us to much much more, and much much less. Let's dream big, be bold and brave and courageous.

And let's really show how messy church can be!