



# TOGETHER

[NewarkandSouthwellMethodist.org.uk](http://NewarkandSouthwellMethodist.org.uk)

## A prayer/year of reconciliation.

Article by Rev Peter Hibberts

It's traditional in many Methodist congregations to begin a new calendar year with a covenant service. If you're not from a Methodist background you may not be familiar with the Methodist Covenant prayer, and if you're new to faith you may not be familiar with the concept of a covenant relationship (I'll unpack these a little more in the message, below, and when I lead this year's covenant services). If you haven't come across them, they are well worth investing time in. The Covenant Prayer and Covenant service (the service in which the prayer is framed as a recommitment) are very special points in the Methodist year.

The origins of the prayer and the service begin in the mid eighteenth century with John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church and his adaptations from other works in the Puritan tradition. The prayer and the service have evolved since then but they were designed to be deeply pastoral (about our relationship with each other - this year all of the membership cards will be on the altar in the services I lead) and about spiritual guidance (allowing God to direct our paths).

This year, if I'm honest, I approach covenant with a heavy heart. My heart has felt heavy for some time and, though this is for many reasons, I cannot avoid the feeling that COVID has damaged our relationships. Whilst some relationships and connections have grown or deepened, COVID has forced us to be more distant from others and our closeness has been affected by not being in as regular, in-person, fellowship. There will no doubt be some folk you have not seen in this time, not worshipped alongside for nearly two years. Folk who you were close to, served alongside, were called to serve God with and now feel distant from; friends.

I approach a month of in-person covenant services knowing that with COVID prevalent again, many will feel it too unsafe to be in the church building together. We may well be praying the covenant prayer with fewer people around us and feel less together than we would ordinarily. That heaviness of heart, for me at least, is one of compassion. I desperately want to know that fellowship again (with all those who I dearly miss) and so for me **the covenant prayer will be a prayer of reconciliation**. It will be a year of asking God to guide me as a minister to the direction *he* wants me to face and who he wants me to minister to. It will be about how God wants me to build bridges, repair relationships and foster positive working together in the coming year to rebuild together.

I feel like there is a mountain to climb in some places; COVID has separated us and the anxieties that have come alongside it have caused further damage both personally and inter-personally. We've seen others as a threat (and been told to distance ourselves) when in reality we are sisters and brothers whom God wants to draw ever closer. It *is* a mountain that we have to climb, but as Isaiah 40 tells us, as the LORD comes,

**“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven grounds will become level, and the rough places a plain.”**

It is only by God's miraculous work and the movement of his spirit that the church works.



# The Church... a marriage made in heaven?

29-12-21

Covenant Service Message | Ephesians 5:21-33 | Rev Peter Hibberts

I recently led a wedding blessing service following a registrar wedding of some friends of ours. Both parties were divorcees and had come together with a blended family. They tied the knot beautifully and it was a privilege and a pleasure to lead a short service and ask God's blessing on their relationship. But I did struggle to write the short message I preached. Firstly, I felt ill-qualified to preach on marriage. (I don't feel particularly good at it and am very grateful to my wife for putting up with me!) And secondly, to preach on how wonderful marriage is in the presence of two people who have known the difficulties it can also bring risked being trite.

In this edition, we focus on the Covenant Prayer (see below for the full prayer). 'John Wesley's original prayer involved taking Christ as, "my Head and Husband, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, for all times and conditions, to love, honour and obey thee before others, and this to the death." He saw the relationship with God in Covenant as being like marriage between human beings.' (Methodist Church Website) I'm inclined to agree on more than one level. Firstly the marriage relationship is one of covenant, a relationship of submission and service - each other's needs to prefer, but also it's a very difficult one and church can be difficult.

The passage I've chosen for today is a powerful one. If lived out, it's transformative for the way we do church. I do need to just cover off a couple of pitfalls though. It's a problematic passage for many too. I don't want to spend too much time going into issues of gender equality as I think this passage potentially tells us more about the church and Christ than it does about gender rolls inside or outside of marriage. To sidestep this potential distraction from what God might be saying, I would simply emphasise verse 21. "Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ." This is universal. This is not about race, gender, social status, or anything else that humanity wrongly uses to rank folk. It is a great leveller. It calls for equality and mutuality in a way that I don't think humanity (and certainly not human institutions) have ever fully grasped. Try not to focus on the problematic references as we unpack, let it all be prefaced and underwritten by that universal mutuality. I want then to focus on a few key concepts here, from key phrases in the text:

**It's about mutuality.** (v21) I've already covered this off a little but it can't be understated. I think this is something that Methodism understands really well. There is no singular priesthood (one person as a priest) in Methodism, instead we believe in the priesthood of all believers. This, in my understanding, means that there is no one person who is a go-between for us and God but we all collectively share that priesthood. That means it is our collective responsibility to present the church to God 'in splendour, without spot or wrinkle.' We are to work together, lay (those who don't wear a collar) and ordained (those who do!) in whatever way God is calling us. This is difficult. We live in a world that organises us hierarchically by rank and considers some more important than others - the church does not, and we sometimes need to remind ourselves of that. The beauty of our church family compared to a workplace (where some may find themselves senior to others, or feel passed over/inferior) is that in Church we are all equal... no-one outranks anyone else.

## 1. Online Service

**This week (2nd January) our online circuit service will be led by Rev Peter Hibberts.**

It's designed to be a **Covenant Service** for those who will not be present, in-person, at their own Covenant Service. If you are planning to be in-person at Elston, North Muskham, Southwell or Sutton-on-Trent you'll be able to experience it 'live' so you may want to save it! That said, you can feel free to read it in advance and let God reveal something fresh on the day as only God can!

Find it on the 'Newark and Southwell Methodist Circuit' YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/NewarkSouthwellMethodistCircuit>) why not invite a friend to watch it with you and share the link with them on your social media or by email! (Also available to watch back at any time).

## 2. 'Zoom' Opportunities

If you're feeling isolated, are not ready to be face to face yet, or can't, but are happy to meet on Zoom, there is a weekly coffee time at 3pm on a Monday run by Charles Street but open to all, email Mel Watson for more details: [mellwatson42@gmail.com](mailto:mellwatson42@gmail.com).

There is also still a weekly Zoom fellowship called 'The Gathering' which is part of Southwell Methodist Church and run by Philip and Francine Holmes. You'd be most welcome, contact Philip to connect: [philipholmes8100@gmail.com](mailto:philipholmes8100@gmail.com).

**It is founded on love, God's love.** (v25) This is key. Without love for one-another we will come unstuck. When a marriage falls out of love, it is doomed. As long as the couple love one-another, it has a chance. It's love that allows for the tension and friction to be passed by, for forgiveness to happen. This is a separate message really but 1 Corinthians 13 is a great place to see this love unpacked and in my Bible this passage is headed, 'The Gift of Love' which tells us that this love is only possible because God has loved us first (1 John 4:19).

**We must love others as we love ourselves.** (v28) This is also key and it's a double edged sword. We must love ourselves. Self-loathing can be very damaging to our relationships. It takes great self-confidence to trust and to forgive. Our love for others stems from our identity in Christ, as loved by him, which allows us to love ourselves and therefore love others. It's much harder to love others if we see them as a threat (perhaps stemming from self-doubt) and when folk hurt us, we need to hear what Christ says about us in order to let that hurt go, forgive, and continue to love them. If we allow that love to die then we will always struggle with church. Many have left the church because 'the church' has hurt them (which is often shorthand for someone in church hurting them). We are all human and we will hurt each other, our only hope is to let Christ's love flow into and through these hurts for forgiveness and reconciliation.

**It is a great mystery.** (v32) Apologies, this is a bit of a catch-all (and maybe it was for St Paul when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians!). To be honest, beyond the advice given, I'm still working out what this looks like for Church. I've grown up in the Methodist Church, as the son of a minister, and have seen its best and its worst. In some ways I wonder at how this un-viable, mess of an institution is still going. I've seen folk hurt, been hurt, and hurt folk (for which I am truly sorry). And yet this body of believers stemming from twelve ordinary people is still growing (even in countries that have made it illegal). It's a mystery. If I'm honest I don't even know what God will do with the churches in the circuit where I'm called to lead in the next twelve months - that too is a mystery. But I do know that God has called me here, God has a plan and it's a good one. I may not be in my comfort zone but I'm content to trust. I invite everyone who can screw their courage to the sticking place to stand with me and follow it wherever it goes.

**It's done out of reverence to Christ.** (v21) And this is our great motivation. Reverence is a funny word. It comes from the Greek *phobos*, where we get fear. It's translated here (in the NRSV) as reverence because it's not about intimidation but a healthy knowing about the power of Christ. It's perhaps better translated as 'sense of awe'. In the presence of Christ, we are so awe-struck that we are compelled to behave in a certain way. I want to end on this and point towards the Covenant Prayer. It's a challenge. It's difficult. If you mean it. But in actual fact, it's simply asking us to emulate Christ. Christ who could have prayed this prayer prior to coming to Earth, prior to starting his ministry, prior to walking to the cross. In his act of self-emptying, self-sacrificing, self-giving Christ epitomises the Covenant Prayer and it is out of awe for what Christ has done for us that we are compelled to self-empty, self-sacrifice, self-give.

Join me in this prayer. Let go of all that hinders you being church and be church - the body of Christ, the hope this world needs, for God's glory and all of our salvation. **Amen.**

## Prayer of approach

Heavenly Father,  
Wherever we are as we worship you today,  
may you reveal yourself to us.  
As we approach you and turn our eyes  
heavenward may you unite us in worship  
and connect us by your spirit.  
May you speak to us today as only you can.  
May you help us to hold the experiences  
that have brought us to where we are now  
in the light of your love, comfort us as we  
pause from our journey in this turbulent  
world and strengthen us for the journey  
ahead.  
May you be glorified in the praise we offer  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## The Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own but yours.  
Put me to what you will,  
rank me with whom you will;  
put me to doing,  
put me to suffering;  
let me be employed for you,  
or laid aside for you,  
exalted for you,  
or brought low for you;  
let me be full,  
let me be empty,  
let me have all things,  
let me have nothing:  
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal.  
And now, glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.  
And the covenant now made on earth, let it  
be ratified in heaven.'

*The Methodist Covenant Prayer*

### EMAIL PRAYER CHAIN

If you would like to join a prayer chain and receive prayer requests or to submit a prayer request (with permission of the recipient) please get in touch with Colin Beckett [colin1244@gmail.com](mailto:colin1244@gmail.com).  
It is for those of any church or none!

## New Circuit Plan

The screenshot shows the website for Newark & Southwell Methodist Church. The main heading is 'New Circuit Plan Dec 21 - Jan 22'. Below this, there is a calendar grid showing dates and service times. Text on the page explains that the plan details services for the season of Advent, including Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. It also mentions that the plan is available in both print and digital formats, and that the church is committed to providing services for all members of the community.

The Circuit Plan, detailing the Sunday services across the circuit and more, is now available at your church or online:

[newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org](http://newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org)

**Songs included in this week's online worship**

Come all you vagabonds (online only) [LINK](#)  
 You're calling us (StF 37) [LINK](#)  
 Great is the Lord (StF 50) [LINK](#)  
 Your hand O God has guided (StF 692) [LINK](#)  
*Click 'LINK's to access YouTube clips of each song.*

**Discussion Questions**

**Church is best done together but we know that this isn't always possible - particularly if you're housebound, isolated or even shielding. But why contact a friend and arrange to watch the church service online or read the newsletter simultaneously and get in touch by telephone afterwards to talk about it. Below are some questions that might help you to reflect together!**

1. What is your experience of the covenant prayer?
2. Are there any parts of it that you find helpful or difficult?
3. What is your experience of church? What aspects of church have you find difficult or helpful?
4. When do you think the church is at its best?
5. What part is God calling you to be in the priesthood of all believers? What part will you play in building the church?

*Spend some time in prayer, for the church.*

**In-person worship across the circuit during the next four weeks...**

December 2021 - February 2022		2nd Jan 2nd of Christmas Covenant	9th Jan 1st in Ordinary Time	16th Jan	23rd Jan Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Balderton	10:30 am	Bates CS / HC	A Trowbridge	LA	Ward T
Charles Street	10:30 am	LA	Falla CS / HC	Mathews	Bates
	6:00 pm	Hibberts	Adams	Bates HC	Falla
Collingham	10:45 am	Hart	K Trowbridge	Bates CS / US	Hucknall T
Elston	10:45 am		Castle		Hibberts CS / HC
Hope Community	10:30 am	Falla CS / at B'gate	Ward at H'ville	Falla at B'gate	Winnington at H'ville
Long Bennington	10:30 am	Hardy	Bates CS / US	West	Gibson
North End	6:00 pm	Morley	Bates CS	Winnington	LA
North Muskham	10:30 am		Hibberts CS / HC		A Trowbridge
	2:00 pm	Falla Café		Hardy Café	
Southwell	10:30 am	Hibberts CS / HC	Pearce	Hibberts	Falla
	Other	Bates 4pm	Hibberts PicC / 2pm	Falla 4pm	Hibberts Fringe
Sutton-on-Trent	10:30 am	Morley US	LA Breakfast 9am		United at All Saints HC / 10am
	Other			Hibberts CS / HC 2pm	
<b>Lectionary Readings (Year C)</b>		Jeremiah 31:7-14 Psalm 147:12-20 Ephesians 1:3-14 John 1:(1-9) 10-18 or Sirach Ecclesiasticus 24:1-12 C: Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21	Isaiah 43:1-7 Psalm 29 Acts 8:14-17 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22	Isaiah 62:1-5 Psalm 36:5-10 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 John 2:1-11	Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 12:12- 31a Luke 4:14-21

For full plan, visit the Circuit Website:

<https://www.newarkandsouthwellmethodist.org.uk/newsroom/circuit-plan-dec-21-jan-22.html>

**Blessing for the New Year**

Dear God, Thank you that you make all things new. Thank you for all that you've allowed into our lives this past year, the good along with the hard things, which have reminded us how much we need you and rely on your presence filling us every single day.

We pray for your Spirit to lead us each step of this New Year. We ask that you will guide our decisions and turn our hearts to deeply desire you above all else. We ask that you will open doors needing to be opened and close the ones needing to be shut tight. We ask that you would help us release our grip on the things to which you've said "no," "not yet," or "wait."  
 We ask for help to pursue you first, above every dream and desire you've put within our hearts.

Shine your light in us, through us, over us. May we make a difference in this world, for your glory and purposes. Set your way before us. May all your plans succeed. May we reflect your peace and hope to a world that so desperately needs your presence and healing.

To you be glory and honour, in this New Year, and forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Written by Debbie McDaniel of [crosswalk.com](http://crosswalk.com)