

## Reflections on an End-of-Life Plan

by Andrew Murphy  
(October 2017)

We are faced with a question: Do we have a 'growth plan' or an 'end of life plan'? (A question that surely applies to the Methodist Church as a whole, as well as each individual church.) One of my colleagues (Revd Andy Fyall) suggested to us that a good end-of-life plan could in fact produce unexpected growth or fruit, depending on how the church approaches it. I agree, and note that 'growing' is not the only sign that God is among us; in our gospel, dying precedes resurrection. To 'die well' (i.e. not in resignation but rather in joyful, generous trust) can perhaps show an even greater faith. Indeed, Paul at times seemed torn with a similar dilemma about his own life: "to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). With Christ, in both living and dying there must be hope. The question is perhaps not whether our churches die or grow for a time; but rather *how* we grow or die; and what new faith, hope or love we allow God to bring out of it.

It occurred to me that Jesus had an 'end of life plan'. Perhaps even that his 'plan for growth' was contained within it. Jesus' end-of-life plan was seen in the compassionate way he tried to prepare his disciples for his suffering and death; it was there in the affirming way he praised Mary of Bethany for anointing him in preparation for his burial; it was there in the powerful example he set his disciples in washing their feet, and in the way he eagerly desired to share the Passover with them before he suffered; it was there in his new commandment, in the careful teaching of his farewell discourse, and in the majestic prayers he allowed them to overhear; it is shown by the way he made provision for his mother

and his friend, by giving them to each other at the foot of the cross. It seems to me that the gospel narratives are unanimous that Jesus had an end-of-life plan, and yet it was not the end: within his end-of-life plan were the seeds of the resurrection life of the new community to follow. The serving, the teaching, the love for one another, the prayers and the breaking of bread all emerged from Jesus' end-of-life plan, forming a community that would daily die to sin and to self, and live in the power of the resurrection.

Why has a church with such beginnings become so fearful of death, dying and decline? What are the elements of Jesus' end-of-life plan that we can encompass in our living, growing and dying? Can we be bold enough to give up all, in such a generous, joyful, compassionate and serving way? Can we share such feasts with our communities that they remember us with joy after we've gone? Can our final acts be extravagant ones of compassion, service and love for neighbour? Can our 'end-of-life' include the seeds or the soil of resurrection? To paraphrase King Théoden (in the *Lord of the Rings* film: *The Two Towers*): *If this is to be our end, then let us make such an end as to be worthy of remembrance.*

Will Methodism survive into the future? Will any individual church or denomination exist in the New Heavens and the New Earth? Or will not God answer Jesus' prayer and make us all one, that the world may believe – and thus bring all things together in Christ? With this future in mind, should we be worried? Or should we not be putting all the energy and resources we have left into building bridges, healing wounds, breaking bread, and showing the extravagant generosity of our Lord, all the while trusting in the unending and undiminishing love of God?