

WHAT'S THE BEST TIME FOR SUNDAY WORSHIP?

A PROPOSAL FOR REVISED
SUNDAY WORSHIP TIMINGS
ROCHFORD SECTION – SEPTEMBER 2020

SOUTHEND & LEIGH METHODIST CIRCUIT

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INTRODUCTION

From 01 September 2020 the Rochford Section will once again share a single minister. With a joint membership of around 130 across the three churches and the geographical proximity of Hockley, Rayleigh and Rochford it makes sense that a single minister has been appointed to pastoral charge of this section of the Circuit from September.

One of the challenges of three churches forming a single ministerial appointment is clergy engagement. Clearly, congregations should not become overly reliant upon ministers in order to function well. Nonetheless, churches that wish to grow will take seriously how clergy might best be strategically deployed.

In the normal run of most weeks, ministerial engagement in the ongoing life of the three congregations will, I expect, be in large part straightforward to manage as local congregations do not often organise mid-week activities at the same times. For example, a Breakfast Club runs on a Friday in Rochford but on a Monday in Rayleigh. Messy Church is on a Sunday afternoon in Rayleigh but on a weekday in Hockley. Church Councils, Pastoral Committees, Stewards Meetings and Annual Church Meetings are held on different dates, etc.

Regrettably, the same cannot currently be said for Sunday services. The three congregations start their Sunday morning services within a 30-minute window: 10.30 at Hockley & Hawkwell, 10.45 at Rayleigh and 11.00 at Rochford. Sunday mornings are the point at which ministerial engagement will be most stretched. As it stands the minister will be able to present in each congregation on average no more than once per month for the main act of Sunday worship, if ai am also to take services elsewhere in the Circuit. In my view this is not nearly often enough to effect meaningful change to the worshipping life of the congregations nor to make sufficient contribution to their preaching ministry.

THE PROPOSAL

In order to respond to this ‘pinch point’ it is proposed that the Sunday morning service times of all three churches be adjusted so that it becomes possible for the minister to present in two congregation on a Sunday. This would allow the minister to lead each congregation’s main act of Sunday Worship typically a minimum of twice per month.

In order to make this possible the timings of at least one of the Sunday morning services needs to begin no less than 1 hour and 45 minutes earlier than the others. By way of example, if one service began at 09.30

and another began at 11.15 it would allow the minister to lead a service from 09.30 to 10.30, to interact with that congregation after the service from 10.30 to 10.45, travel to the next congregation from 10.45 to 11.05 ready for an 11.15 start. For the earlier congregation, additional opportunity for interaction with the minister would need to occur prior to the service, for example, the minister might welcome to the service. For the latter congregation there would be little time for pre-service interaction but much more leisure after the service for conversation.

Each of the three Church Councils early next year will be asked to approve a change of service time to either 09.30 or 11.15 which will take effect from 01 September 2020. This will allow sufficient time to plan for and to advertise the change of timings across the circuit and among our wider networks within the communities we serve.

There are essentially two possible arrangements of the proposed changes to Sunday morning service timings. Church A meets at 09.30 and Churches B and C meet at 11.15 **OR** Churches A and B meet at 09.30 and Church C meets at 11.15.

The congregation meeting at 09.30 should ideally be smaller so that the 15 minutes available to greet the congregation between services is sufficient not to feel overly rushed. With an average Sunday attendance of 20–30 on Sunday mornings both Rochford and Hockley and Hawkwell currently fit this category. Rochford is currently the only one of the three congregations to serve coffee within the worship area after the service. This arrangement minimises movement after the service and therefore also minimises the natural loss of time in the transition from the act of worship into conversations over teas and coffees.

Because of congregation size moving the Rayleigh congregation to 09.30 is likely to prove less practical. However, it would be certainly be possible for Hockley and Hawkwell to move to a 09.30 start. However, the layout of the Hockley building means that the Hall where coffees and teas are served lies in the opposite direction from the main exit. This means that catching the congregation in the limited time available between the services would be less efficient. Some thought would need to be given to the location and efficiency of serving coffees if an 09.30 start were to be considered at Hockley.

Of the possibilities before us moving the Rochford service to 09.30 seems at this stage to be the optimal configuration. The question then remains whether it is better that Hockley and Hawkwell also moves to 09.30 or to 11.15. Rayleigh because of its current size should move to a later time of 11.15.

Having considered a variety of possible arrangements it is my view that there are two possible optimal configurations:

Option 1: The Rochford service time (Church A in the above scenario) moves from 11.00 to 09.30, Hockley & Hawkwell (Church B) moves from 10.30 to 09.30 and Rayleigh (Church C) from 10.45 to 11.15.

Option 2: The Rochford service time (Church A) moves from 11.00 to 09.30, Hockley & Hawkwell (Church B) moves from 10.30 to 11.15 and Rayleigh (Church C) from 10.45 to 11.15.

THE RISKS

Changing long established service times for three congregations is not without risk. There is a risk that the new times will prove to be too much of a disruption for some members of the congregation. For a congregation that moves to an earlier start time the availability of public

transport could prove problematic for those who need it. And for those for whom age or disability means that it takes a long time to get ready an earlier start time might prove a struggle. For others simply the introduction of change might provide an opportunity to rethink their commitments to our congregations.

So, there are multiple risks that changing the timing of Sunday Services could result in a reduction in congregational attendance and accelerate the current rate of congregational decline. It is likely we might lose a small number of people in the transition.

There is also the risk of doing nothing. All three congregations are in decline with a rapidly ageing membership. Fewer people are carrying multiple responsibilities that in a previous generation would have been carried by a wider and younger group of people. We operate 'a single person deep' in many areas so that it becomes increasingly difficult to find replacements for those who hold office. Which means that our congregations are precarious. Continuing as we are means that our decline will also continue, and it is clear to me that there is a significant risk that each of the three congregations will not survive the next 5 years unless it finds new ways to adapt and grow in the short term.

Changing service times is not a silver bullet to cure long established congregational decline. Instead, it is an attempt to provide better ministerial engagement and greater continuity and consistency in Sunday morning worship, which in many ways acts as a shop window into the wider life of congregations. In addition, congregations which have undergone a process of facing the risks of experimenting with a simple change like the timing of Sunday services might find it easier to contemplate the other risky experiments which will be necessary if we are to make steps towards personal and numerical growth.

RESOLUTIONS

1. The Church Council receives this report

2. The Church Council agrees to change the start time of Sunday services as follows:
 - a. **Rochford:** from 11.00 to 09.30 with effect from no later than Sunday 06 September 2020.

 - b. **Hockley:** from 10.30 to 09.30 **OR** from 10.30 to 11.15 with effect from no later than Sunday 06 September 2020.

 - c. **Rayleigh:** from 10.45 to 11.15 with effect from no later than Sunday 06 September 2020.

3. The Church Council agrees to review the changes in Autumn 2021.