

A Developing Strategy for Mission and Ministry

Introduction

In December 2019, our Circuit Meeting agreed to a new strategy following a process in which churches offered feedback to a series of questions. From the outset, we agreed that the strategy and the re-organisation of the Circuit structure, which we'd agreed in March 2019, would be evolutionary rather than revolutionary and that continuing change would be necessary as we sought to make the most effective use of the resources available to the Circuit. That decision has proved to be wise. The world, our communities, our churches, and some of our lives have been, and will continue to be, changed by the unexpected events of a global pandemic. Some of what has happened over the last 18 months was beginning to emerge beforehand, but the rate of change is greater than we could have anticipated and a return to the way things were before is no longer possible.

The Circuit vision remains the same. It is to enable us all to worship God and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our mission is to share fellowship and resources across the Circuit, develop a sense of belonging so that we can build each other up and consider, develop and unlock opportunities for mission.

The last 18 months prompt us to ponder what aspects of what has happened and is happening among us, is the movement of God's Spirit? Where in it all is God leading us? How might we faithfully proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in our changed and changing world? This first update to the Circuit Strategy arises out of reflections on questions such as these by the Circuit Stewards, officers and staff. Some sections remain the same and this is indicated below. Some, including finance and property, have been partly removed because they need to be updated. Others have been removed because they need to be rethought in the light of recent experience.

An Eccentric Life

A significant word in our reflections on the churches' responses to our questions (March 2019) is 'sacrifice.' It is a challenging word for some contemporary Christians, yet it is central to our understanding of God and to the Christian life. God's life, expressed in creation and supremely embodied in the incarnation, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ, is an eccentric life. The word eccentric here doesn't mean odd, but standing back from the centre to make space for the other. God's love is constantly being poured out into the world, and through the Spirit we are being drawn into the life of God to join in this eccentric life through ministry, service and evangelism. The scripture passage that sums this up best, is Philippians 2.5-11. It begins: *'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...'* (NRSV)

We commit ourselves to an eccentric life in the annual Methodist Covenant Service. *In this covenant God promises us new life in Christ. For our part we promise to live no longer for ourselves*

but for Christ.' The promise we make is made in the covenant prayer, in which we *willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.*' (The traditional version says *'freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.'*)¹ We renew this commitment regularly when we share in communion where the word sacrifice is more usually used *'In union with Christ's offering for us, we offer ourselves as a holy and living sacrifice.'*²

What this means in practical terms, is different for each of us, though the Methodist Church has recently put some shape around what that might look like for Methodists and it is now on our membership ticket alongside Our Calling.

Our Calling

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

Let your whole way of life respond to God's call:

- Letting **life** grow in you every day
- Nurturing **life** in the Church
- Bringing **life** to the world.

This is a Methodist Way of Life.

Worship
The Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love.

Learning and Caring
The Church exists to help people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care.

Service
The Church exists to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice.

Evangelism
The Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ.

More information, advice and resources about a **Methodist Way of Life** will be available in 2020.

This eccentric, sacrificial way of life, extends beyond our individual Christian lives. It is the calling of the Church, from local churches, to the whole Connexion. It needs to be willingly embraced if our life as individual Christians and Christian communities is to bring life to the world. This is the rationale behind the strategy being proposed for the WER Circuit.

Context

The contexts in which the churches in the WER Circuit are engaged in mission and ministry are diverse. However, there is much we share, and also share with other affluent parts of the British Isles. The impact of the global pandemic has been different on different people. For some, it has changed everything, for others it is a momentary challenge that we need to overcome but that should not disrupt us forever. The experience of the Circuit Leadership Team is that its impact has been, and will continue to be, significant although it is probably too early to offer conclusive comments. However, we are already aware even though Hampshire's unemployment rate is lower

¹ Methodist Worship Book, *Covenant Service*, 281-296

² Methodist Worship Book, *Holy Communion for Lent and Passiontide*, 148-159.

than the national average with housing costs about £50,000 above the national average, the presence of shelters for homeless people, food banks, and the need for *Make Lunch* and *Dovetots Plus* in our churches, are evidence of poverty. This has increased during the last 18 months. More hidden is the poverty that comes with loneliness, limited neighbourliness and community spirit, or from the search for material fulfilment. This is the poverty Jesus calls poverty of spirit in Matthew's Beatitudes. Most people are very busy, and do not have time to invest in the local community or in their own spiritual lives. Into this environment come thousands more people, moving into housing with no communities or places of worship.

We live in a society that is changing. The 2018 report on The Ministry in the Methodist Church³ identifies some of these changes and we reflected on these at a staff meeting in the autumn of 2019.

- The greater emphasis on individual choice is resulting in an ever-more dominant, 'me first' attitude. Religion and spirituality are increasingly approached within a consumerist framework.
- Faith lives alongside a more assertive secularism in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society. With Christianity being only one of many faith options and the Church's behaviour coming under greater scrutiny, Christianity's influence and moral authority has diminished.
- Social and political polarisation, along with economic, regional and generational differences, are creating new divisions within British society and these are being seen in issue-based campaigning such as climate change or new builds in 'our' backyard.
- The pace of life is increasing and is reinforced by technology and social media.
- While denominational identity is declining, there is also less energy for ecumenism. The British Methodist Church is now a marginal organisation in a constantly changing society.
- Along with other voluntary organisations, churches are affected by a growing unwillingness to commit, whilst at the same time being required by law to be compliant with an increasing regulatory framework that includes safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, health and safety, GDPR, charity law etc.

WER's staff are aware of how challenging these changes are. With change as a constant, we recognise that many Christians and churches react defensively, seeking to maintain the church as one place where the legacy of the past is honoured. Yet, we also know that among us there are people of deep spirituality, who are willing to let go of what nurtured them in the past in order to make space for others. So, we reflected on what gets in the way of churches seeking a spiritual as well as a physical legacy and identified a number of possibilities. These are included in the conclusion below.

The Challenge of Resources

³ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/7937/conf-2018-32-ministry-in-the-methodist-church.pdf>

The resources available to the churches in this Circuit, and to the Circuit – money, people and property - are finite. The pandemic has increased the scarcity of all except church buildings.

People

Between 2013 and 2020, the total Circuit membership has declined, from 999 to 772. Attendance has declined further, from 909 to 665 (October 2019 figure). This does not include attendance of those who are not counted as Methodists at St Francis, Valley Park and United Church, Winchester. In 2020 reporting changed, and the total including LEP members, is now 1022.

This isn't simply an issue of numbers, it also represents a reduction in the people resources available to churches, for maintenance and governance as well as mission and ministry. One of the most pressing challenges for all churches is the availability of people to undertake roles necessary for a church to exist.

These include stewards, treasurers, pastoral visitors, property stewards, safeguarding officers, GDPR champions, and Church Council secretaries and musicians. As well as that, staff work with children, young people, and other activities to build up the life of the church and engage in mission. In addition, the Circuit is also dependent on churches releasing some of their members to serve the wider Connexion, in the Circuit and District. Worship could not happen were it not for Local Preachers, Worship Leaders and supernumerary ministers. Circuit oversight requires Circuit Stewards to manage the Circuit's property and finances and to oversee lay employment, Safeguarding and governance.

Many members are giving their time sacrificially, holding several roles in churches and across the Circuit, but with ageing congregations this situation is not going to improve unless there is growth or we invest resources in employees. Some administration can be streamlined and churches can share resources, but without people churches cannot function.

We are yet to see the totality of the pandemic's impact on people's willingness to share their time and gifts. Throughout the last 18 months, those in leadership roles have continued to offer sacrificial service, ensuring that the Circuit has continued to function. For their time and energy in challenging circumstances we are grateful. However, there are also indications that this time has provided some with an opportunity to reassess their priorities and, after many years of service, some Local Preachers and supernumerary ministers are choosing to step back from public ministry.

Lay and Ordained Staff

The existing situation

In 2021-22 we have had following staff in the circuit. Full-time staff are three presbyters, a minister of the United Reformed Church at United, Winchester, an Anglican minister at St Francis, Valley Park, and a children and youth worker. Two supernumerary ministers at Wesley, Weeke and Kings Somborne (50%) and Colden Common with Tywford (9 hours). Our minister Without Appointment

at Bishopstoke and St Andrews (50%). The rest of the staff team is three part-time lay workers and a part-time administrator for 16 hours. We have recently appointed two Local Pastors and are looking for a third.

Spreading ministerial resources ever more thinly is counter-productive. This does not allow presbyters the time to get to know the members of the churches for which they have pastoral responsibility or the communities in which those churches are set. As a result, they are less effective in enabling congregations to engage in mission in those communities alongside other churches. The reducing availability of ministers across the Connexion means that seeking more than the existing number of ministers is unlikely to be successful – even if we could afford them.

Area Ministry Teams

In the light of recent experience, the Circuit Stewards and CLT have done some significant rethinking about the way in which ministry might be offered in the future. We recommend that that presbyters, local pastors and pastoral assistants work cooperatively in teams across specified areas, to support each other and share the ministry and mission work agreed with the churches and circuit. Each church will have a named minister or ministers and churches will have an opportunity to share their views about these groups. Three Area Ministry Teams have been agreed. We will begin work to establish these in 2021-22. The staff listed below is what is intended for 2022-23.

Central Area team: Chandler's Ford, St Francis' Valley Park, St Andrews, Bishopstoke and Colden Common with Twyford will include 2 full-time presbyters, and the minister Without Appointment (50%). One of the full-time presbyters will be working alongside the Recognised and Regarded minister at St Francis, Valley Park. Two Pastoral Assistants have been appointed for Chandler's Ford.

Northern area team: United, Wesley, Kings Somborne and Alresford will include 2 full-time presbyters (one URC) and a part-time local pastor. This will be the area in which the Superintendent is based.

Southern Area team: Romsey, Cadnam, Wellow and Canada Common and Landford will include 1 full-time presbyter, 2 local pastors and 1 pastoral assistant.

The Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent (see below) Ministers, with the Children and Youth Worker and the Circuit Administrator will work across all three areas.

Further work needs to be done on: a) establishing a pattern for team meetings that ensures that the staff continue to be a Circuit Staff team whilst also meeting in areas, b) oversight of each Area Ministry Team, and c) where there is more than one presbyter, clarity about line management responsibilities.

Local pastors, as Presbyters are, will be circuit appointments tied to area ministry teams. The local pastors and pastoral assistants will be line managed and their work overseen by one of the presbyters within the area team. Local pastors and Pastoral Assistants will receive group

supervision. The supervision of the Presbyters is determined by the District Implementation Plan. The teams will be kept under review by the CLT and will evolve as mission opportunities arise.

Establishing Expectations of staff

In order to establish a shared understanding of the roles of presbyters and local pastors we will undertake a piece of work setting out what is expected of presbyters e.g. chairing meetings, managing pastoral work, developing mission opportunities etc. Currently, all Presbyters are provided with a 'Letter of Understanding' when a match is agreed, but it is very general and not particularly helpful. We have agreed a generic job description for a Local Pastor. This will be the basis for a refined job description when we seek to recruit for particular area and will be agreed with the churches concerned. The Presbyters' meeting and the CLT will take the lead on this work before further discussion in the Circuit Meeting.

With these expectations clarified, there will provide the starting point for conversations with the Stewards and Leadership Teams in each church to agree the priorities for staff, also taking notice of the particular callings and passions of each staff member. These will be shared with those in oversight of staff members (including line managers, the Superintendent and Deputy, as well as Supervisors and the Circuit Stewards involved in Ministerial Development Reviews).

A formal division of work between the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent

There is a need to readjust the workload of the Superintendent. In the short term the Circuit Stewards are working with the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent. In the longer-term, the workloads will be re-aligned by transferring parcels of work and responsibility from the Super to the Deputy. The Circuit Stewards and the Superintendent will work together to identify these tasks and responsibilities. The additional work for the Deputy Super should be relieved by local pastor support within Area 3.

A Circuit-wide Strategy for Youth and Children's Work

Currently the strategy for youth and children's work and for the priorities of the Children and Youth Worker are agreed by the Management Committee and reported to the Superintendent and from time to time, the Circuit Meeting. There is some good circuit-wide work happening and the churches working with children and young people receive excellent support. The time is right to establish and agree a Circuit policy and priorities.

Resourcing Worship

A significant resource available to the Circuit is the commitment of Local Preachers who enable us to provide regular worship in all of our churches, along with the Worship Leaders who serve individual churches. Prior to the pandemic we had very few Local Arrangements on the Plan but noted that the travel required in a Circuit this size challenges our commitment to be an eco-circuit. The pandemic has challenged us to rethink how worship is resourced and we need to continue to learn from what we have done well. We also need to note that the pandemic has resulted in a significant loss of people resources – Local Preachers, Worship Leaders and supernumerary

ministers. With others, they have worked hard to provide worship and spiritual resources for churches and the wider Circuit. However, it has also been a time of reflection and some have chosen to reduce their commitments or to step back from public ministry.

All this has led to a significant reduction in the number of people available to lead public worship Sunday by Sunday. On the last Plan-making day we were 36 appointments short. The final Plan was better than this but only because preachers have agreed to additional appointments. We cannot keep on assuming that this is possible. The June - August Plan is always challenging because of ministers' and preachers' holidays, but there are 6 more regular services still to be re-instated. There is also a desire to keep some of the online worship and some churches are considering new forms of worship. The presbyters' and LPWL meetings are considering a way forward but churches and the Circuit as a whole will also need to reflect on which of their services should take priority, and how we decide.

The Winter quarter may also see churches reduce the frequency of Sunday service or close until Easter. The circuit will need to resource worship opportunities for those who find themselves at home without access to a local congregation. Alternatively, creative ways of sharing worship through online engagement or posted resources need to be factored in.

Finance

There are five sources of financial resources available to this Circuit and its churches: properties (churches and manses), investments and cash in the bank, income from lettings, the pockets of our congregations, and where grant applications are possible, in grant-making organisations. It should be noted however, that grant applications are largely for new or exceptional work, usually requiring significant local funding, and where projects need to become self-funding after 3-5 years and that Connexional grants are now only available for work establishing 'New Places for New People.'

Churches across the Circuit are seeing their income fall – money received from congregation members has declined and letting income has been hard hit by the impact of the pandemic. This will take time to reverse – letting incomes may increase as lockdown restrictions ease and gift days and fellowship events for fund raising will help. However, this will require additional time of members and employees and may detract from our core mission and ministry. Given this, the only available funds that the Circuit currently has are those already held or from the sale of property.

Property

Within the WER Circuit, 14 churches and 5 manses, are Methodist Trust properties. Church Councils and the Circuit Meeting are the local managing trustees but all our buildings belong to the Methodist Church and we hold them in trust. The Methodist Council now requires Circuits to create a mission plan that includes a property strategy and encourages us to ask some critical questions. We haven't yet begun to do this task.

Eco-Circuit

The Circuit has the distinction of remaining the sole Eco Circuit in the Connexion. Other Circuits are certainly prioritising this as their target too. We have an opportunity to go beyond a bronze award if two more of our churches could take steps to gain an Eco Church award. Climate Sunday Services this summer will be opportunities for churches to consider their level of commitment.

Centres of Mission and Centres of Fellowship

In several circuits and districts across the Connexion, churches have been designated as centres of mission or centres of fellowship. We have done the same. However, we recognise that there is some dissatisfaction with these categories and the pandemic prevented us from meeting with the majority of churches to explore their future further. However, we wish to retain them for the moment, noting the following.

- In March 2020, the Circuit Meeting agreed that every church is a Fellowship Centre and will need to manage their own property, finance, Safeguarding and governance. If this is not possible, or membership drops below 7 (a proposal to increase this to 12 will be debated at Conference), they will be helped if they so wish, to find alternative meeting premises or to join with another fellowship for mutual support.
- Churches worked hard to provide evidence that they met the criteria for missional communities / churches.
- The categories will be used by the Area Ministry Teams and revisited in the light of experience.

Centres of Fellowship

Centres of fellowship are those in which there is deep and deepening fellowship between members but where the opportunities for growth are limited by the capacity of members or their location. By concentrating on the things they are good at, rather than trying to do everything, centres of fellowship churches will be, or become, attractive Christian communities to those who live in their locality. They will focus on worship, learning and caring. They will seek ways of letting life grow in individual members and nurturing life in the church. They will still engage in service and evangelism but their main way of bringing life to the world, will be through planned giving and the witness of individuals.

The primary purpose of the activities these churches undertake in the community will be to build up the life of local communities. While it is hoped that they will also attract people to explore the Christian way of life, they will provide opportunities for isolated people to meet in a supportive and safe environment.

The developing weakness in Centres of Fellowship is the lack of available office holders. Federating societies or some becoming classes of another may help lift some of the burdens and provide a realistic level of support and is being actively explored.

Missional Churches / Communities

Centres of mission are churches that are growing in depth or size, those with significant community or ecumenical engagement, or the potential for continuing growth. They will be actively engaged in all four areas of Our Calling. They will be consistently seeking ways of letting life grow in individual members, of nurturing life in the church, and will be bringing life to the world as individuals and as a community.

What that looks like will be different for each, so they will provide evidence that, over the past 18 months, they have been engaged in activities that meet at least three of the following objectives⁴:

- Making new disciples and growing in discipleship
- Establishing fresh expressions of church and church planting
- Developing initiatives in mission-shaped ministry
- Engaging in community-focused social action
- Working with families, young people and children, and older people
- Reaching the missing generations
- Building community cohesion

It is assumed that centres of mission have sufficient resources to manage their own property, finance, Safeguarding and governance effectively.

Local Ecumenical Partnerships

In addition to these two categories, there are also Local Ecumenical Partnerships which, currently have ministers from other denominations. United has more engagement with the Circuit than St Francis and is currently undertaking a review that we hope will lead to a clearer understanding of their relationship with the Circuit and to the proposed Area Teams. Regardless of this, when

ministry changes, a conversation with these churches will be required to decide on which category they fall into. This also includes churches actively seeking relationships with another denomination where there is potential for ministry to be shared.

The new development at Landford, where Anglicans and Methodists have united for a weekly act of worship called The Gathering, is not a formal LEP but is a potentially-exciting way forward.

In rural parts of the circuit these cross-denominational links should be welcomed and encouraged. A tentative link between three of the churches in Wellow parish (West Wellow and Canada Common Methodists and St Margaret's CoE) may be another.

New Places for New People

The WER Circuit also wishes to use its resources of staff time, energy and finances to create 'new places for new people.' The aim of this work would be to encourage and equip Christians moving into new areas to contribute to building community cohesion and to reach out to those who do not yet know Jesus. It should be noted that Connexional Grants are now only available for this category of mission. The focus will be on 'church' as a community gathered in the name of Christ; not on our present church buildings.

⁴ These are the objectives agreed by The Hull (Centre and West) Circuit and were used as a starting point in WER.

We will share, where possible, with other denominations to establish new Christian communities in areas of new builds. We included some new housing work focusing on Winchester and Kings Somborne in the recent presbyter's profile. We have prompted conversations in the District about how circuits and the District might work together on this area of mission. We are also in regular conversation with the Southampton, Wimborne and Christchurch Circuits about the possibility of sharing ministry in new housing areas across circuit boundaries. However, there is also potential in Stoneham Park, Horton Heath, Boorley Wood, the proposed housing between Bishopstoke and Colden Common and around Fair Oak, and Alresford.

Conclusion

As indicated above, when the WER staff meeting considered how our context is changing, we also began to identify what an eccentric way of life might look like. These are framed these as a series of invitations, reflecting the attitude we encourage as we move forward.

- Be willing to try new things, to become vulnerable, and risk failure.
- When there are several options, take the riskier one, rather than those that fit existing resources.
- Widen our understanding of church and our expectations of worship, beyond 5-hymn sandwiches, to children's, young people's and adults' fellowship groups where worship is involved; to Messy Church congregations, and so on.
- Become more open to learning, to increase our theological literacy, and our skills in speaking about the Gospel.
- Become more flexible and so truly welcoming to all.
- See the money, time and energy we give to the church, as our response to God's grace and generosity, to be used to build God's Kingdom rather than 'ours.'

June and October 2021