

The Methodist Church
Harrow and Hillingdon Circuit

Background: The Circuit, when it first came together, undertook a full Circuit Review working alongside The London Methodist District. As a result of this review, the Circuit carried out what was named 'Circuit Roadshows' and continued discussions with individual churches through the Mission Action Support Team (MAST). All were carried out primarily to look at the following issues:

- What was good about the Circuit;
- What were the issues that each Church was struggling with;
- How could the Circuit support and encourage churches in their Mission and Discipleship.

These reviews highlighted some excellent work happening in local Churches; however a number of major issues arose from these reviews which included:

- Ageing congregations;
- The need for better communication from the circuit;
- Lack of ordained Ministers;
- Lack of volunteers in local Churches to carry out essential roles;
- The size of the circuit (17 Churches).

In late 2013 it was agreed by the Circuit Leadership Team (CLT) to try and bring these reviews together by inviting members of the Circuit to respond to two letters written by the Superintendent in December 2013 and March 2014. Comments were received from individual members of congregations and also from special meetings set up by local Churches to look at the letters. These have been collated and cross referenced. Many Churches in the Circuit had extended conversations looking at the local situation in which they find themselves. Of course such a document runs the risk of underrepresenting the majority view and over representing the minority view, but, where possible, an overall sense of the majority opinion is given throughout this document which includes the actual policy to be found on pages 5 - 6.

The nature, theology and role of the Circuit: Standing Order 500 states that 'The Circuit is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help. It is in the Circuit that presbyters, deacons and probationers are stationed and local preachers are trained and admitted and exercise their calling. The purposes of the Circuit include the effective deployment of the resources of ministry, which include people, property and finance, as they relate to the Methodist churches in the Circuit, to churches of other denominations and to participation in the life of the communities served by the Circuit, including local schools and colleges, and in ecumenical work in the area including, where appropriate, the support of ecumenical Housing Associations'.

Within this backdrop the Circuit Meeting is tasked with a variety of activities, including *watching over, watching out for, monitoring, discerning, directing, guiding, encouraging and caring*; all of this is done in the context of reflecting what God has done, is doing among us now, and what he might require us to do in the future as members of the body of Christ. It is well documented that Methodism exercises its oversight through Circuit appointed bodies (CLT,CM) as well as individuals (lay officers appointed locally, which include Pastoral Visitors, Church Stewards, Church Treasurers and others) working with ordained staff stationed in the circuit and lay employees directly employed by the local Church or through the Circuit.

It's therefore in our DNA that we are connected to the other local Churches, and the Circuit, in the belief that all Christians receive gifts and God-given skills and therefore all have a part in forming its vision. As a Circuit we respect and should reflect on what it is to be Christ-like and work in relation with others. Working in this way also reflects the Methodist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; recognising different orders of Ministry (Presbyter and Deacon), as well as a variety of lay roles who exercise Ministry, and who all share in the Ministry and mission of God.

The Circuit delegates some of its day to day work to other bodies, for example the Circuit Finance Meeting, the Circuit Leadership Team and the Circuit Property Committee, which are all required to report to and make recommendations to the Circuit Meeting.

Within the context of the nature of Circuit, and recognising that local Church Councils are Managing Trustees within their own right, it would be difficult, and almost impossible, for the Circuit to make specific recommendations for the future on every issue that Churches might wish it to.

However, it is less difficult to commit ourselves, through conferring and prayer, to work together in ensuring that in all that we do, as a Circuit, we seek to be faithful to the call of God and the mission for the Church, as well as discharging the legal duties as trustees of various groups, and funds. In doing this we seek to hold each other in prayer for our common life as a Circuit.

The nature, theology and role of the circuit can be defined in the following way:

'We are to take the broader view by seeing how the different parts fit into the whole so that all parts flourish and fulfil Gods Mission.'

(Those parts being local churches and its members.)

The Methodist Church and other churches are facing a time of great change and our Circuit will not be unaffected. The prospect of change can be alarming, but it is also exciting. The whole Church is going to look very different in a few years from now, and so will our Circuit. We have an opportunity not to be merely the victims of change but to take the initiative, under God guidance, in order to serve him the best we can in the future.

Towards a Circuit Strategy: The process has revealed some of the vision and creative thinking, as well as concerns, present in our churches across the Circuit - in particular in relation to our worship life, our relationship with the wider community, a desire to share our faith, the deployment of Ministers, the desire to be flexible and to find new and more effective ways of using our buildings for Mission. Mission within this context can be defined as Church growth, allowing people to explore their faith journey in a safe place, engaging in community work, social action locally including at Circuit level and encouraging new, or established, small internal groups to celebrate their life together, and with others, through hospitality and prayer.

There were six consistently held points made throughout the submissions:

1. There is a strong acceptance of the need for change, and recognition that this provides the church with an opportunity to grow;
2. Members recognise the need for a strong sense of Mission and Outreach in any future plan for their church and the Circuit;
3. Members believe that more contact with, and better continuity of, their Presbyter is important for the growth of the church;
4. Fewer, stronger, properly resourced churches are at the center of what members want for the future of the circuit, (and many recognise that this means closure of smaller churches);
5. Members want a Circuit which can actively support both a closer connection between local churches, and provide professional finance and property services for churches;
6. Members recognise the need to provide high quality modern worship and believe that sharing worship resources and skills is key to this.

Staff – Lay and Ordained

It is clear that building a strong relationship between Ministers and their members is very important, but made impossible by the number of churches our Ministers are covering. We have to acknowledge that this is a problem across the Connexion and there are simply not enough Ministers for the number of Churches we have locally or nationally.

At present the Circuit is blessed with a committed staff team of lay and ordained members, but we also recognise the stress that today's ministry puts on them and also on the members of local congregations. It is clear that some Churches feel that they do not see their Minister often enough, which gives fewer opportunities for engagement regarding a wide range of issues.

If we were to increase the number of ordained staff as part of our future thinking this would need a commitment from all the churches and need to be paid for through the annual budget which may, or may not, seek to increase local Church contributions to the Circuit funds.

Some Churches might not directly benefit from such an increase of ordained staff but the nature of Circuit life is that we share the gifts of our staff across the Circuit rather than just in sections.

Over the years the number of ministers has decreased but we have increased our lay staff across the Circuit.

As a Circuit we are committed to ensuring that there be a strong ministerial team with the gifts and skills that are required across the Circuit now and in the future.

Number of Churches in the Circuit

Within many of the comments received in reply to the Superintendents letter, there was widespread agreement and recognition across our circuit (albeit perhaps reluctant) that we have reached the time when a number of churches will shortly have to close if the number of members does not increase or continues to decline.

As some Churches struggle with finance, and personnel, it has been suggested, through the consultation, that local Churches within a short distance of each other should consider 'joining together' enabling a greater resource base; or even consider a total rebuild as a 'mega-church' combining two or three Churches in the same area, or section, and providing state of the art community facilities. This would enable the congregations to focus on the local community more and also release the Minister for new work. Neither a Circuit strategy, nor the Circuit Meeting itself, can recommend the closure of Churches - each Church has their own managing trustees and therefore, within our current standing orders, this is not possible. Any local Church that wishes to cease worship and ask permission to close needs to bring a recommendation from a Church Council which has been prayerfully considered by the local Church as a whole.

However the Circuit is happy to facilitate conversations about the viability and sustainability of Churches or regarding how Churches might look at joining with other churches locally. As Circuit we would be committed to providing all the help and support that such a venture might require.

The Circuit Leadership Team and Circuit Meeting would welcome any Church, or group of Churches, that wishes to start conversations regarding how they might do things differently in relation to mission and outreach.

Of course closing Churches alone would have no impact on the number of members or the quality of worship and therefore it might be suggested that we need to significantly update and modernise our style of worship, in terms of the delivery (including language), content and hymns in order to reflect modern tastes whilst recognising and accepting our differences in style and theology across the Circuit.

Administration and Communication

In the last year we increased the hours of the Circuit Administrator to full time in order to aid general administration across the circuit, and to help enable us to increase our communication with each other. We have responded to the Senior Church Stewards' requests for forums for a variety of groups. Over the last year we have organised forums for letting secretaries, church stewards and safeguarding officers with the intention of regular meetings to share good practices and learn from each other. This has been welcomed and has worked well. We have also produced role descriptions though generic leaflets entitled '*are you called?*'

In an age where the responsibilities of being local trustees is requiring specialised gifts and skills, employing professional finance and property staff to be shared across the Circuit could be a positive and important step in reducing the burden of such tasks, thereby releasing valuable resources for other activities.

The Circuit is committed to ensuring that there is good governance in areas of finance, property, and Human Resource matters in relation to the Methodist discipline and the Law of the Land. As a Circuit we are committed to sharing good practice with each other across the Churches.

The need for change arises both because of the positive opportunity that exists to spread the Good News in local churches, and the circuit as a whole, and the reality of the present day that we now have to prayerfully consider the future.

Harrow and Hillingdon Circuit Policy

The Circuit is the primary unit in Methodism (S.O.500)

- We will encourage Circuit identity and a sense of shared mission;
- Circuit staff will be deployed in order to further the mission of the whole Circuit;
- Profiles for new staff will include the gifts and skills needed for the whole Circuit and not just individual sections;
- We will encourage more people to respond to the call to be Local Preachers and Worship Leaders. We will provide new resources from different traditions for Local Arrangements;
- We will encourage churches to see the Circuit Assessment as missionary giving not as an unwelcome imposition;
- We will encourage Church Councils to have intentional conversations regarding how best to use legacies and other funds to enhance mission locally or within the Circuit;
- We will allocate two designated funds within the budget for lay training and new mission projects;
- Every year the Circuit Finance Committee will assess the need to rent manses and give a formal report to the Circuit Meeting.

Our two LEPs give us particular opportunities to work ecumenically.

- We are committed to these and will look for other ecumenical opportunities whether through formal relationships or through joining in specific pieces of work.

As a Circuit we...

- Will give priority to resourcing the churches that have a clear desire for mission and discipleship which will continue to be, and will hopefully develop as, strong bases for our work. If these not nurtured and built up we risk losing those key bases;
- This prioritising will be reflected in the funding and agreeing of building schemes and in the funding of Circuit lay workers for individual Churches;
- Will be committed to assisting Churches through a central administration 'hub' in all aspects of legal, human resources, finance, building projects, to ensure good practice and governance. This will be done through existing structures and by finding new ways of working in particular through on-going communication.

Our individual Churches...

- Will be supported as long as the members of those churches wish and able to sustain and continue their work;
- New initiatives for mission and growth will be supported;
- If help is needed with specific tasks from members of other churches in the Circuit this will be facilitated, if possible, or we will sign post Churches to qualified persons;
- Will be committed to exploring new forms of worship through no more than two local arrangements in each of our Churches per quarter unless there are exceptional circumstances exist ¹.

However, as a Circuit we will not

- Commit large sums of money or large numbers of people to retain buildings in places where the life of a Church is no longer sustainable;
- Resist requests to close a Church if the local Church Councils seek permission;
- Resist Churches looking at new ways to develop mission and discipleship opportunities;
- Continue to rent our manses without a clear policy for our reasons.

Circuit staff

- We will arrange the future staffing of the Circuit to reflect these policies;
- All ordained staff will have the opportunity to take up to 5 days off during the Connexional year for further training to enhance their current ministry within the local churches they serve. The circuit will be committed to supporting this financially and the cost will be determined on an individual basis.

In order to encourage our sense of being a Circuit ²

- We will be committed to hold at least two Circuit services a year as a celebration of our life together;
- We will offer a wide range of training opportunities and forums in different locations across the circuit to allow churches to learn from each other, to share good practice and explore new ways of working;
- The Staff and Circuit Leadership Team will continue to monitor and reflect on these policies and report to the Circuit Meeting on a regular basis.

Notes:

1 – Additional Local Arrangements may occur where exceptional circumstances make it impossible for the circuit to provide a preacher. For example, during a period of a reduced number of ministers due to sabbaticals, illness or changes in stationing, and during times of Christian festivals. To avoid disappointment on Christmas Day or Easter Sunday churches are advised to make arrangements well in advance, especially when Communion is required. Also note that Joint Services will be scheduled for the Sunday after Christmas Day.

2 – See the section titled 'The nature, theology and role of the Circuit' on page 1