

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

Isaiah 43:19

Introduction

Some things are working really well in the District as discussed at the workshop for circuit leadership teams held in October 2024: Many circuits reported a sense of team, committed volunteers, the employment of administrators is making the running of circuits more efficient, lay employees in various out-reach roles are making connections between church and community, alongside this there are places where fellowship and prayer meetings and good worship are supporting the church community. Such things are to be celebrated. However, can we recognise that to do Gods work and thrive (some might say survive) and grow across the County in the 21st Century, we may need to look at new ways of working?

The District is not alone in facing a number of challenges which “are of our time!”-

- Reduced interest in the Church and Spiritual life as a nation
 - Congregations on a Sunday are reducing
 - The average age of congregations is increasing
 - Financial pressures to meet assessments
 - Fewer people are willing and able to take on governance roles such as money, property, safeguarding etc.
 - Time spent on essential standards for any charity limits the time and energy of members to do God's work in our communities
 - Reducing numbers of ordained Ministers
 - Fewer Presbyters skilled enough and willing to become Superintendents
 - Differing levels of resources across the District
- You could probably go on.....

The District needs your prayers and thoughts on possible “new things”- new ways of working. District Council have put together a few alternative options for all members to consider.

Option 1

1 District/1 Circuit Model

- ✦ Gradual move to 3 Superintendents with bases in the north, centre & south.
- ✦ Divide the Circuit into what we may call 'missional areas', places which neighbour one another geographically & 'communities of practice' places which may not be geographically adjacent but are doing similar work eg in areas of urban deprivation or holiday parks.
- ✦ Conversations would need to be had with existing active Presbyters about re-allocating pastoral charge, with possible manse moves. Longer-term the geographical spread of clergy would change over time.
- ✦ Conversations with Local Preachers will establish the limits of where they would be willing to preach.
- ✦ Any finances reserved for specific projects would remain under the stewardship of the relevant trustees.
- ✦ Aim to re-calculate assessments for year 2 of the new Circuit.
- ✦ The primary role of The District, aside from its responsibilities as set out in CPD, would be to make Local Churches aware of and resource skills in the Connexional priorities of The Methodist Church; *God for All Strategy, Justice, Dignity and Solidarity, Hope in God's Future, and Walking with Micah.*

Pros	Cons
Fewer Superintendents needed through Stationing. Sharing of resources across the Circuit – financial and ministerial, seeking to balance the current unequal distribution. A larger pool of people from which to draw the necessary office holders. (The new Circuit would need teams of people to hold the various areas of work because it would be too large for individuals to hold on their	Requires care to make sure that the technical differences between District and Circuit are maintained where necessary. Eg the work of the Circuit Meeting and the work of the District Synod. CPD describes the Circuit as the primary unit of mission. There will need to be a re-evaluation of the administrative functions and responsibilities of the Circuit, and how it holds oversight of the missional areas.

own, but it is anticipated that not as many people as are currently tasked with the responsibilities would be required.)

A team of administrators who would work in their own geographical patch supporting local work for the Local Churches and missional areas, but who also may hold a specialist area for the whole Circuit eg website support/ employment/ property consents

This may be supported by new employed posts to cover more specialist areas if needed.

The aim would be to remove work from the desks of clergy and laity to give capacity to refocus for mission.

Avoids the historical reticence of some parts of the District to be aligned with other parts. Everyone would be 'in it together.'

Avoids the current piecemeal changing of Circuit boundaries as circumstances dictate.

Potential stability for a longer-term. Ending Circuit boundary changes. (We need to remain mindful of the potential for District boundary changes.)

Working out new ways of meeting together will take time. Eg how do Local Preachers Meetings happen? (Zoom is an obvious solution to the issue of distance, and it works towards net-zero ambitions. But it requires good internet connection, the ability to be connected, and it removes an element of social interaction which is often so important.)

How do we work out the Preaching Plan?

Requires willingness to establish new relationships and embrace different ways of working, including expectations on ordained ministers.

Option 2

3 or 4 Circuit Model

- ✦ We have seen over the years a large number of reactive circuit boundary changes which have come about when circumstances have dictated that they must happen (usually the lack of a superintendent minister.) This model involves a planned, systematic redrawing of Circuit boundaries from a clean map (ie not taking account of any current Circuit borders.)
- ✦ Much of what is said above (1 District/1 Circuit) may be relevant to this model.
- ✦ This model may also include a type of 'Bridge Circuit' which would centralise legal and compliance issues for Circuits and Churches. This could, in practice, be District employee(s) without the need to establish a virtual circuit. However, all the Circuits may decide to hold these tasks individually through current administrators and possible new appointments.

Pros	Cons
Starting with a clean sheet would enable us to look strategically at centres and satellites.	The requirement of considerable conversation to establish where the new boundaries should be.
Being proactive enables us to have space and time to consider rather than hurriedly reacting to necessary change.	The current imbalances of staffing and resources across the District would be addressed to a lesser extent than might be achieved through 1 District/1 Circuit.
Fewer Superintendents needed through Stationing.	This need not put an end to already existing relationships and meetings in certain areas, even if that area finds itself split between 2 new Circuits. But a willingness to also look to the new will be helpful.
More resources than are available to current Circuits.	
Circuits would be free to organise themselves for worship, mission and administration within their own borders.	
Larger pool of people from which to draw the necessary office holders for the new Circuit than is available within current Circuits.	

Option 3

Hybrid Model

- ✦ Perhaps the correct image to use here is that of a journey rather than an end point model. This idea offers a “buy in” situation; one where circuits can become part of a new way of being in ministry with one another (based on a Bridge Model, Single Circuit, etc.), while other circuits have an open invitation to become a part of that at a future date, should that be the wish of the circuit, and in the meantime continue as they are.
- ✦ This is offered as, historically, the thought of circuits merging or reshaping could be seen as a sore point based on past experience, or some circuits might have already gone through a recent merger and the thought of doing it again is too much.
- ✦ To note: This hybrid model can be scaled down to work within existing circuits, but focused on churches. Eg: Circuit A, rather than being 12 individual churches, would become a single church circuit, with many sites. Within that, some chapels might want to carry on as they are, while others would want to join up to this new model.
- ✦ The District would revisit it regularly to reevaluate its ongoing situation.

Pros	Cons
Offers a “phased” entry.(ie: Not all circuits need to be starting this model by X date, but can join as they feel called). Initially fewer Superintendents needed, with the need for further Superintendents reducing as more circuits join the model. The impact of a slow but steady take-up could have benefits in our adjusting to and troubleshooting of new ways of being in ministry. Local Relationships remain unchanged for some, but increased opportunities to “all be in this together” with the merged model.	Would require some additional workload while both models are in existence. Continued redrawing of Circuit boundaries as circumstances change, which has, historically resulted in geographically difficult Circuits in some places. Imbalance in staffing and resources would become more of a problem over a longer period of time.

Option 4

Retaining Current Circuits

- ✦ It is always an option not to change. We may decide that the time is not yet right, or that we do not have the energy to do so. However, we must be aware that deciding to leave things as they are has its own pros and cons.

Pros	Cons
Local relationships remain unchanged and un-stretched. Retaining very local control of resources. Cross-Circuit working, such as shared Local Preachers Meetings could be easier to achieve because of smaller geographical areas. No particular difficulties around travelling for Circuit Meetings etc.	Awareness of the constant pressure on finding ministers in Stationing and a recognition that in some situations no minister may be matched. Continued reactive redrawing of Circuit boundaries as circumstances change has, historically resulted in geographically problematic Circuits in some places. Some circuits may have sufficient resources in skills and finance to employ and retain good administrative support and specialist lay workers, others will not, creating an imbalance across the District.