



Wirral Methodist Circuit

Mission Planning April 2023 – Next Steps

A. Background

In March 2022, after extensive work by and with the churches, the Circuit Meeting adopted a Wirral Circuit Mission Plan. The Plan contained four areas for immediate action:

1. Carry out a review of church mission plans and dialogue with the churches about how they see their future post-COVID; help them develop compelling, clear and realistic goals, and consider resourcing needs.
2. Decide how best to restructure Circuit financing/assessments in order to reduce costs, maximise church engagement and promote joint working.
3. Develop lay leadership across the churches.
4. Address governance and church council structures across the Circuit to lessen the burden on ministers.

Beginning with the Circuit Meeting in September 2022, we devoted substantial Meeting time to exploring these issues. This process culminated (for the moment) in a Circuit Meeting Awayday on Saturday, 25th March 2023, when more than forty members spent a day considering the way forward.

B. Awayday: summary of discussions

The day began and ended with prayer and worship, and it was good to punctuate the day with song also. We know that all progress depends on us hearing God and following in the way he lays out for us.

The context: Rev Heather Cooper

We are aware that there are various pressures on our witness and our ministry as Methodist churches in Wirral. The latest membership figures register a further decline; finances are an ongoing concern; and we are in the middle of a period of change in terms of ordained ministry: Jackie leaves in August, with Ruth Dowson, a probationer, coming to minister in Ellesmere Port; in August 2024 Heather will be retiring, and Rev Yangsun Yi's invitation needs to be considered for renewal.

Already ministers are being stretched to cover the churches, and that is a matter of concern for them and for the churches they serve. We know that "business as usual" is not an option, and we must be proactive in the renewal of the Circuit both spiritually and structurally if we are to fulfil our calling.

Session 1: Why? - Deacon Ellie Griffin

Ellie began the day by challenging us to look at what we do in the context of our purpose: begin with why. The session began with a short video by Simon Sinek, which you can view on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Wb8KpHqU5tg>. As churches, we mostly focus on *what* we are doing and *how* we have to do it – adding new ideas and events; but we can lose sight of the why – the purpose.

We spent time in groups listing *what* we did, *how* we did it, and, most importantly, *why* these activities have found a place in our church life. From this, we began to discern and state our purpose. Groups were encouraged to take their ideas back to their churches to share with others and invite them to participate in the process of purpose-building.

As we focus on purpose, and our mission becomes the driving force in our churches, we are more likely to be able to create structures and activities which truly fulfil what we want to do – build the church, bring people to know Jesus, and serve our communities (however that is expressed or stressed in the purposes of each church).

We reminded ourselves that we work within the framework of purpose established by the Methodist Church, and by the Circuit. Neither is constraining: they should galvanise and encourage, rather than inhibit.

The Purpose of the Methodist Church

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. It does this through Worship; Learning & Caring; Service; Evangelism.

Wirral Circuit Mission Statement

The Circuit exists to support the churches in God's mission: to know Jesus and to make him known.

Session 2: How? - Rev Jackie Bellfield

The Methodist Church nationally recognises that there is a need for major change in how churches engage in ministry and mission. A number of initiatives and models are already in place, and more is being written and promulgated on almost a daily basis. (*See appendix for details.*) The Methodist Church is being very flexible in terms of what solutions churches might generate, and what kind of structures will need to be in place to fulfil governance requirements, while freeing up energy for mission.

The issues around these changes have been summed up in three words: **Presence; Pastoral; Polity.**

Presence: In what ways is God calling you to your community? Have we become so inward dwelling we have forgotten our outward focus? Which places in our community/area are we absent?

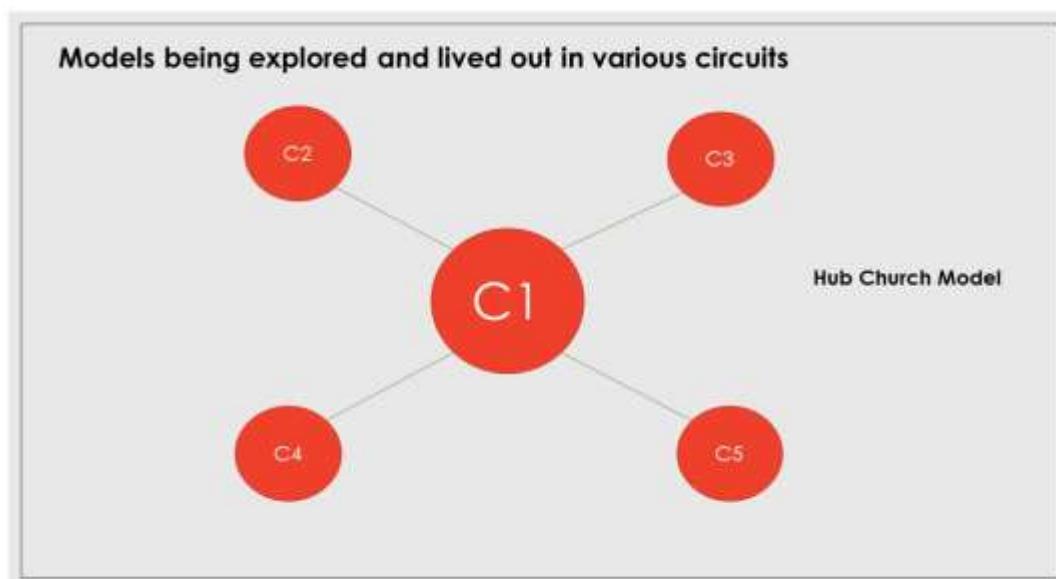
Only once we have discerned where we join God in mission do we talk of the practical – governance, finance and buildings. (It starts with why!)

Pastoral: We recognise the loss, pain and anger associated with any change, especially when people have a long history with particular places and people. We must look after hearts and minds – look after each other. There is support for churches and individuals going through this process of change.

Polity: Legal and constitutional issues. Guidance regarding schemes to amalgamate Local Churches into a multi-site Local Church under Standing Orders 605A and 942 with a number of sample resolutions are available. (See appendix.) Some circuits have already embraced the change and we can learn from each other.

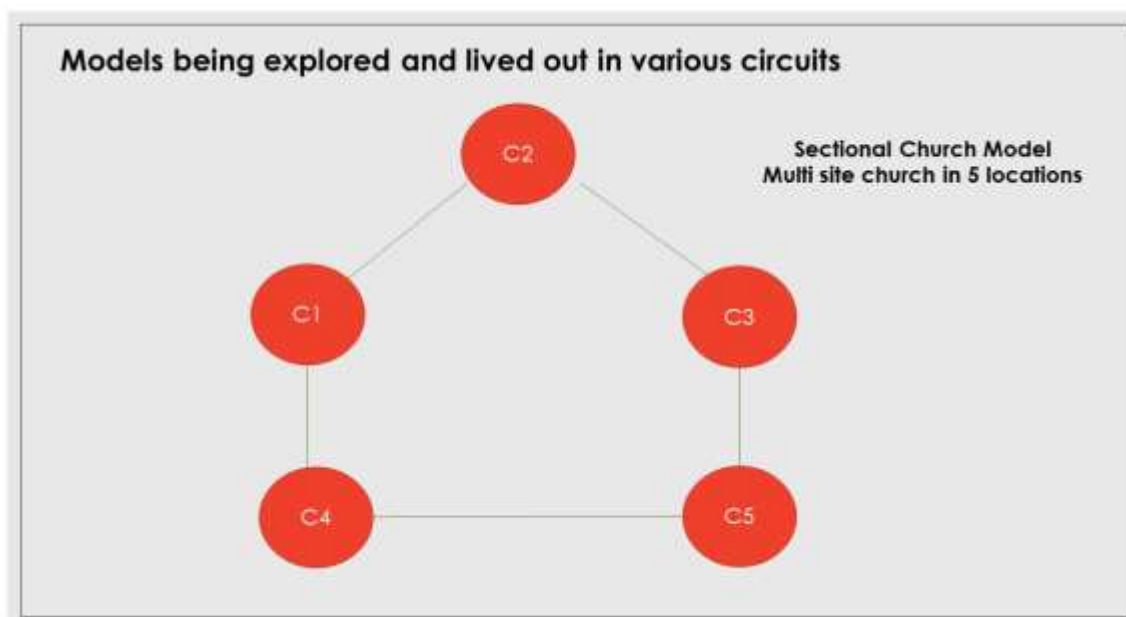
Jackie talked through two options for merging churches, both of which are real-life examples.

(1) Hub church model



In this model, C1 is a large and thriving church, and provides the main thrust of governance and financial management; the four satellites are taking various bespoke approaches to their ministry – in some cases selling existing buildings and meeting in alternative premises, or partnering with local agencies (e.g. foodbanks) to make better community use of their facilities. *This model could be appropriate where there is a large central church able to bring smaller congregations “under its wing” and enable them to retain their local identity and mission.*

(2) Sectional church model



In this model there is no one dominant centre; the five churches work together with a single church council, and with each local congregation working out what works best for their local setting. *This model could be appropriate where there are several churches which are individually viable, but could be better working together, filling gaps in each other's leadership and ministry.*

Session 3: What? – Cate Warbrick, Circuit Steward

This session was about responses, questions, comments and encouragements. Many churches are already looking at the best ways to work together and – potentially – to merge; others were encouraged to look around and consider what their next steps might be.

In summary, we have an exciting opportunity to reinvent the Wirral Circuit, to work together and to fulfil the purpose for which we are called. Churches who were at the Awayday (the majority) were excited to take this message back and begin the work.

We finished by singing together: *“O thou who camest from above, The pure celestial fire to impart: Kindle a flame of sacred love On the mean altar of my heart”*. May it be so.

C. Next Steps

Churches

The Circuit Leadership Team requests the churches to share this information with their members, and, ideally, to devote a Church Council to exploring how you might plan for

change. Please invite your Circuit Steward representative to join you for this meeting so we can understand how churches are responding, and what support we can offer.

Circuit

Decisions about the future pathway of individual churches rest with those churches. The Circuit's role is to lay out a vision for a viable and vibrant Wirral Circuit; to encourage churches to consider how they may best fulfil their own vision and mission within that context; and to co-ordinate and support the work which is being done to that end.

The CLT's support of churches will be led by the mission strategy group. This is made up currently of Yangsun Yi, Ellie Griffin, Cate Warbrick and Pete Wildman. We will grow that group as needed to fulfil its brief. This group will be the contact point for churches seeking any kind of support, and will report regularly to the CLT on progress.

In addition, each church has a Circuit Steward representative; please invite them to your Church Council them and encourage them to come! In that way the CLT will be able to gain a better understanding of the churches' ideas, intentions and initiatives, and to hear directly about the obstacles being encountered.

There are three main ways in which the Mission Strategy Group/Circuit Leadership Team will encourage and enable this process – and we are happy to receive input from churches on what other help would be valued.

1. Communication

The necessary communication channels run in three ways: the Circuit needs to disseminate information to all the churches; churches need to keep us informed about their work; and churches will, of course, be talking to one another, both those churches with whom relationships are developing, and others who may be further along the process, and may be able to offer advice and cautions.

From the Circuit to the churches.

- (a) Since the interruption of COVID, we have neglected to reintroduce the Good News magazine. We'll remedy that lack as soon as possible.
- (b) We'll devote a section of the website to sharing and disseminating information and resource links (see Section E below). We'll see if it would make sense to have an online forum – ideas welcome.
- (c) The Circuit Meeting is, of course, the main forum for discussion and reports, and we'll ensure that mission planning is a regular item, with further opportunity for open discussions.
- (d) We'll write to stewards periodically to see how things are going. It might be good on occasion to have further smaller-scale meetings to explore issues that are arising. We'll keep an eye on that.

From the churches to the Circuit

- (a) Please keep us informed about your plans and progress. You can email petewildman@wirralmethodist.org.uk as a central point of contact. We'll also ask for articles for the Good News issues.
- (b) Let us know what you need to from us. We are assuming a need for access to resources and possibly facilitation of discussions (mentioned below), but there may be other advice needed (governance, finance etc.) – we'll find the right person to help.

Between churches

This is the most important part. Talk to one another and see where there are opportunities for working and growing together. At the point where there looks to be an advantage in a formal merger, you'll work with ministers and leadership teams to consider the best options.

2. Access to resources

There are lots of resources being published almost daily as churches across the Connexion wrestle with questions and opportunities raised by the idea of multi-site churches. Section E below gives an initial list of what we know about, but more will be added (however we are able to get them into your hands – by email updates or a web-based or cloud-based resource).

Once we know what your specific issues are, we will also be able to tap into resources within the Circuit, District, North-West Learning Network and Connexion. Resource may be things to read, videos to watch – or there may be opportunities to set up a meeting or Zoom call with someone who can address the questions being asked.

3. Facilitation of discussions

A couple of groups are already planning more in-depth discussions, and have invited someone from the Circuit to be involved. We'll look around for the best people to help, whether it is a need for leading a discussion, bringing expert input, or a more lengthy involvement in the change process.

D. Resources – an initial list

You can access these and other resources at www.wirralmethodist.org.uk/planning-together/

1. The Methodist Website

Leading churches into growth: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/lead-churches-into-growth/>

* Sign up for the Leading into Change newsletter: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/lead-churches-into-growth/develop-transformational-leadership/sign-up-for-leading-into-change-newsletters/>

Merging churches for mission: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/mergeformission/>

* Small church stories: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/lead-churches-into-growth/merge-churches-for-mission/small-church-stories/>

Guidance on church mergers (technical and governance stuff):

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/governance/guidance-on-church-mergers-and-amalgamations/>

Webinars: Small Churches: What's our future story? <https://www.eventbrite.com/cc/small-churches-whats-our-future-story-1941809>

2. Other web resources

It's easy to search the web for material about multi-site churches, although the US sites tend to be focussed on growing extra "campuses" for thriving churches. I used AI (Bing) to search for articles about church mergers in the UK, and this was amongst them - not entirely relevant, but some good points. [Church Mergers - 10 Things to Consider - Smart Church Management](#) . If you come across resources, email me at petewildman@wirralmethodist.org.uk and I'll add them to the list.

Pete Wildman
Circuit Steward