

“What is to be done?”

Meeting the challenges facing the Lincoln Circuit

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On behalf of the Circuit leadership Team

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“What is to be done?” – meeting the challenges facing the Lincoln circuit

Summary

We all know our churches are under pressure. Simply keeping things going is getting more complex and demanding as we face the requirements of safeguarding, finance, building maintenance to modern standards and data protection. Even in larger churches it is often difficult to find people with the time and gifts to take all this on and in smaller churches with older congregations the burden is becoming too great to bear. Even worse, all the “must be dones” can get in the way of a church’s calling to worship, to reach out in mission and service and to enable its people to grow as disciples of Jesus.

Add in the fall in the number of ministers across the Methodist Church and our own shortage of local preachers and worship leaders and it becomes impossible to see how we can continue just as we are. The Circuit Leadership Team (CLT) has concluded that without a really big change in the way churches and the circuit work, then in 5 years we will probably have fewer than a dozen church buildings open (compared to 18 plus three local ecumenical projects and Stones Place now), with at best 3 ministers.

CLT has therefore produced this paper to provoke thought, discussion and above all prayer that will lead to action to make us fit for the purposes we believe God has called us to. It analyses our present situation and describes the decisions we believe individual churches and the circuit need to make.

These decisions are:

- 1) To commit to open and honest debate about the future.
- 2) To commit ourselves to act on the results of our debate.
- 3) Whether we are willing to move from our current pattern of independent local churches to new patterns of working together.
- 4) Whether we are prepared to develop a circuit strategy that concentrates resources on those churches with the desire for mission, whilst continuing to support those churches who decide to focus on fellowship and ‘traditional’ low key contact with their immediate surrounding community.
- 5) Whether we are then able to focus the work of ministers on growth (both of numbers and in discipleship) rather than on maintenance.

It goes on to indicate some of the possibilities for change. These are ideas to provoke thought and prayer rather than formal options. There is not likely to be a “one size fits all” solution: if we change we will probably end up with different local solutions within an overall circuit network.

We believe that unless we not only agree that change is needed but actually make those changes the current trend of decline in most of our churches and the circuit as a whole will continue. The paper therefore ends with a timeline for action (Appendix A on pages 21 and 22).

There are threats. We are weak in many ways. But at the same time **we believe** there are new opportunities as the communities in which God has put us change and above all we have a God who has given us many strengths and who longs to see us reshaped to fulfil his purposes. This paper is not a plan to manage decline but a call to allow ourselves as churches and circuit to be remade so his Holy Spirit can flow through us to those around us.

We hope that everyone will at least read the sections 'What is to be done?' on p15, 'Ideas' on p18 and the 'Next steps' and 'Conclusions' on p20. It will be very helpful for at least church stewards and leadership teams to read it all before the meeting at Moorland Park on November 27th. Over the winter we would expect churches to discuss and pray over their future shape and direction so that they will have initial ideas for their Spring church councils before the Circuit meeting on March 18th decides whether this is the way forward for the circuit.

Introduction

All of us who have been members of Methodist churches in the Lincoln area for any length of time are tempted to look back: churches more than half full, many with young people and Own Arrangements a rare event. But "Never ask, 'Oh why were things so much better in the old days?' It's not an intelligent question." (Ecclesiastes 7 v10 GNB). The world has changed; not in its need for the Good News but in the way that need is expressed in an increasingly individualistic and media centred world which sees "religion" as at best a private hobby for those who like that sort of thing and at worst as a dangerous though outdated threat to progress. But although we may not have conformed to the world we have stayed different by trying to perpetuate the old ways, with a veneer of modernisation but without the transforming renewal of our approach to making Jesus known. A post-modern world with no concept of "true truth" and where individual success is the highest goal "because you're worth it" simply sees us and our message as irrelevant. How many of our churches have seen people without any traditional background of Christianity come to faith in the last 5 years?

As a result we have been fading away for years and are now approaching a situation where even the structures of organisation and finance that enabled us to fade in some degree of comfort ("we can keep on as we are") are now threatened: circuit reserves are "healthy" only because we have sold so many buildings.

We do not want this. Neither does God But if we are to see him bring new hope and life to our community then we need to be prepared to accept the pain (and joy) of being transformed, not only by a renewal of our mind-set but by practical changes in the way we do things.

Although this paper began with one person bringing together what people have been talking about for several years it has been considered in depth by the CLT and we all agree with its analysis and conclusions. It will be for individual churches¹ to read it, consider it pray about it and then form their own conclusions on it and **then** for the circuit meeting to form an official Circuit view, make decisions affecting the whole circuit and act on them.

Some of the ideas may appear provocative and the conclusions painful but in the sort of crisis the CLT believe we are facing then we need to accept we need to face up to inconvenient and uncomfortable truth.

In fact, this paper mostly deals with only limited aspects of church and circuit life. The emphasis is predominantly on the "how" we might change the structures and strategy in order to encourage growth **in** spiritual, numerical and community influence. We do not for a moment think that changing structures will itself change our attitudes or behaviour but working towards the right structure and strategy – getting the plumbing right - will help prepare us for a new infilling of the Holy Spirit and His flow through us to our communities.

This means that much of what follows will appear to be from a perspective that owes more to a "management" view of life than a "spiritual" one. But God is Lord of all and this approach is complementary to the "Gateways to God" self-

¹ In all that follows "church" is to be taken as the local organisation (Society in traditional terms) which exists as an independent legal entity, with the church council as Trustees. A "congregation is a group of believers (whether church members or not) who regularly meet together as the local expression of the Body of Christ, in a traditional building or elsewhere: we all know a building in itself is not a "church" let alone a congregation. The circuit is made up of churches as organisations associated together with ministers appointed to it by the Methodist Connexion with the Circuit Meeting as the decision-making body for matters that concern all the churches within the circuit.

assessment tool that churches have previously used so that the “Gateways to God” conclusions of the individual churches can be put into practice in terms of future structure and ways of working.

We start by giving a context by looking at the “threats” we face in our contemporary environment and then considering our current weaknesses. But then we look at the positive aspects: the opportunities we have both now and in the near future and the strengths that come from him who is at work in us, the people of god. (see Ephesians 1 v15-22). We have the promise of all that we need to do his will: the challenge is for us to pick up the tools he offers us and use them with power he inspires within us.

Our situation - threats

1. Complex requirements

The modern world is having to face up to the fact of evil in a new way. It has always been there, but we are increasingly aware of dishonesty and abuse in all its forms coupled with rightful expectations for transparency, integrity and openness in organisations and those who lead them. The internet and social media have both exacerbated and revealed the issues and society’s reaction has been to become much less trusting and much more regulatory in an attempt to control potential wrongdoers and (positively) protect the vulnerable. This means that safeguarding has become increasingly complicated and inclusive, that information governance (who knows what about me and for how long and do they have my consent?) is increasingly important, that financial management has become more complex and health and safety, risk assessment and food hygiene training all feature heavily in church life.

This may make us all safer but the burden of understanding, keeping up to date and applying legally enforceable regulations has become very great. And of course, the requirements are the same whether your church membership is 12 or 1200. We may think Connexion is too ‘pernickety’ but the potential damage to reputation (and therefore to the reception of the Gospel) is too great for them to have anything but a very ‘risk-averse’ approach.

2. Lack of resources

Regulations need resources if they are to work. In many cases these are not so much financial as human: we need people with a certain degree of expertise and organisational ability to understand, apply, monitor and report compliance with the regulations. Such people may be in short supply even in big organisations and in addition there is a risk that the visible “must be dones” take up all the time and energy so that there is little left for doing what the organisation is really there for.

Financial resources are also important. We have had a long period of austerity which has resulted in a fall in real wages (perversely pensioners have suffered less from this although of course most had a lower income to start with). At the same time prices and costs have risen and for many churches the challenge of meeting the assessment and maintaining the building have increased. Although the circuit and some churches have considerable reserves, charity law puts limits on these unless they are for specific planned purposes and the Charity Commissioners appear to be taking an increasingly challenging approach in this area.

3. Societal attitudes

Society and the church may have had a closer relationship in the past though that has sometimes been because the church was not adequately exercising its prophetic role. But Society has now moved away from many values it held in common with the church. Indeed, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that a

world view directly antithetical to the Christian one is coming to dominate our society.² The church today is therefore more isolated: if it speaks prophetically, especially on “moral” issues (let alone on specifically “spiritual” matters) it becomes unpopular with many of those who set the secular agenda, a situation not unknown to Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

This has resulted in overt hostility to many ‘traditional church’ positions and although this still falls very far short of persecution it means increasing challenges to our speaking out, accusations of extremism and the possibility of official inspection of activities such as holiday clubs. At the moment most of these threats are potential rather than real but the fact the general spirit of the age and the church’s feeling that threats are being made risks creating a defensive and risk averse minority mentality. Coupled with our cultural reticence to upset people this may act to inhibit us from making changes designed to make us outward facing and challenging with grace particular groups and trends in society.

4. Local culture

Lincolnshire is atypical of most of the UK: largely rural, off the main lines of communication, with a low median income, few “hi tech” jobs outside Lincoln and a very small Black and Ethnic Minority (BEM) population. Although it is a good place to live in many ways its relative social and physical isolation has resulted in an inward-looking culture (especially marked in older people) which is sturdily independent³, resistant to change and dubious about its benefits. There tends to be an assumption that “it wouldn’t work here” and a preference for what is seen as familiar (though to be fair we have not heard anyone insist that ‘Singing the Faith’ is not a patch on ‘Hymns and Psalms’!)

5. Challenges within the Connexion

This is not the place to analyse in depth the issues the Methodist Church as a whole will face in the next 2-3 years. Suffice it to say that there are potential challenges to current faith and practice which could lead at the very least to intense internal debate and therefore risk distracting us from our main calling even if they do not immediately threaten our unity. There is always a risk that differences over an issue seen as a matter of principle can result in an entrenching of attitudes on quite different issues, even when these are much more local and practical, therefore threatening local unity within a wider, formally united church.

Connexion also faces a massive shortfall in the numbers seeking ordination which will see a rapid decline in the number of ministers available for appointment within the next 5 years,^{4 5} with obvious implications to the staffing and viability of circuits: I would expect to see many more circuits coming together as we have done in the next few years, especially as the number of new presbyters starting their ministry as ‘mature entrants’ will exacerbate the existing shortage of ministers with the desire and experience to become superintendents. Local church pastors could be part of the solution, but it seems that after some initial success very few are being appointed: in fact, recruitment is on hold in the Lincolnshire Methodist District.

On a local level we are seeing very few people who believe they may have a call to preach or become a worship leader coming forward with the result the Plan is increasingly hard to fill. Conference’s decision in

² See for instance Dr Joe Boot’s essay on “Sexual politics” (www.christianconcern.com)

³ A trait that goes back at least to mediaeval times when Lincolnshire had a much higher proportion of “freemen” than most counties.

⁴ From information shared at the recent meeting of circuit stewards from across the District we could see the existing 29 ministers in the District reduce to 20 or even less in the next 5 years. The Connexion was 50 ministers short for last year’s stationing round, with a shortfall of about 25 in this year’s round

⁵ Only 14 people entered ordination training across the Connexion this autumn.

June to be more flexible on the requirements for worship leader training may help recruitment to that role but Conference also decided all local preachers should be re-assessed every 3 years. However desirable this is in terms of maintaining standards an immediate practical effect is that some older preachers may decide to step down rather than face a totally new experience.⁶

Our situation - weaknesses

Of course, God delights to use the weak things of this world to confound the strong. But in human terms a weak person has to use much of their energy simply to survive: not much is left for actually getting on with their calling. Most of the weaknesses below interact.

1. The small size of our churches – basic viability

Even though numbers are not everything, an established local church needs a core of committed regular worshippers to maintain its basic functions of worship and witness. If it is to function administratively and be financially viable as a church⁷, it needs to have some of these worshippers as committed members. When we first discussed it the CLT thought that a church with less than about 15-20 regular worshippers (10-15 members) and is not looking and planning to grow numerically does not have a future life expectancy of more than a few years, particularly when one considers its probable age structure (see below). Since then Connexion has put out for discussion the idea that a church needs to have at least 100 members to be viable although it might meet as several congregations in different buildings.

An additional point is the visibility of small churches. We live in a culture where numerical size and growth are equated with success. We know God has a different set of values (1 Samuel 16 v7) but a very small church is less likely to make its voice heard, even in a small community, especially if it is not working with others of like mind.

2. Small size and the impact on 'overheads'

- a) Even the smallest church has as many core roles as a large one – senior steward, treasurer, safeguarding officer, church council secretary, ideally at least one more steward. Even if there is doubling up at least 3 individuals are needed (besides the minister). If there is only a small pool of members the same few are likely to have to continue in their role, especially when an ageing membership is considered. This leads to fatigue, difficulty in accepting and managing change and encourages a 'bare survival' mentality. In addition, the church is very vulnerable to one of these individuals being no longer able to continue.
- b) A minister with several small churches will have to spend a lot of time on both management and even day to day administrative tasks as well as pastoral tasks that in a larger church could be taken on by church members or even paid workers. This means that as the number of ministers available decrease they will find it harder to fulfil their call to mission, systematic teaching and disciple making and interaction with wider groups.
- c) Running costs do not decrease in proportion to a decrease in congregational size. Leaving aside the assessment it is going to be harder for a congregation of 20 to run a building built for 100 than it

⁶ This happened in General Practice when compulsory revalidation was introduced: many GPs of pensionable age decided it was something that they were not prepared to take on towards the end of their career and retired.

⁷ See definitions in footnote 1, p 3

would be for a congregation of 80 in the same building, especially when demography becomes a factor.

3. Our demography

- a) It is true that many of our churches are in “elderly” communities (Nettleham has a population where around 30% of the village are over 65) but most churches have a congregation even older than their community average. Local preachers in their mid-60s often preach in churches where there have only been 1 or 2 younger than themselves. If you doubt this compare the number of funerals of church members to the number of marriages of church members in the last 5 years! ⁸
- b) Even though there are now an increasing number of churches with young children attending there are very few with teenagers or even people in their 20s and 30s. House prices and job availability play a part in this but whatever the reasons no church will survive more than a few years if all its members are 70+ and no-one new is coming in.
- c) We expect massive housing growth in several areas within the circuit in the next few years. Younger people will not usually be attracted to a church of elderly people (even if they are responding to the gospel in the first place) and few churches even have a vision and strategy for reaching older people (most of whom are now probably the second or third generation of non-church goers).
- d) A downward spiral of small size, age and decreasing ability to resource their management and finances means that several of our churches are approaching a tipping point: indeed, that has been one reason why at least 5 of our churches have closed in the last 5 years⁹.
- e) A separate point is that many of our churches are majority female in membership. This is not unique to Methodism (there are complex reasons why men appear to be less willing to respond to the Good News) and is compounded by older women living longer than men but sadly it does diminish their potential appeal and outreach to almost half the population.

4. Our finances

This has already been mentioned but it needs re-emphasis especially as several church council meetings in February and March of this year indicated that financial demands are beyond the ability of the church to meet without drawing on reserves.

Our declining membership are mostly on relatively fixed incomes (at very best rising only at the overall rate of inflation) and many are already giving “above and beyond”. This limits potential income and the tendency will become more marked. Even if we had an influx of younger members the age of austerity will limit their capacity to give as much as in the past.

The demands from Connexion via District rise inexorably. Of course, we know that most of this is for ministers’ stipends and the black hole in the Connexional pension fund needs to be filled. There are also the costs of complexity: we need specialist advice on topics such as safeguarding and in fact we need more such advice in other areas. In addition, running cost inflation always seems to exceed the headline rate and as buildings age crises such as burst boilers can arise without notice.

⁸ In 2017/18 across the circuit there were 9 baptisms, 9 marriages and 43 funerals

⁹ South Clifton, Newton, Ermine West, Sturton and Ingham - though the last of these is being “reborn” as café church and Messy Church. Appendix 3 lists all the churches closed since 2002.

All this is before we even begin to think about the costs of developing buildings and activities for ministry beyond ministers alone: IT in all its forms, specialised workers, giving to people and organisations outside the immediate church family with whom we are called as part of the world-wide mission of God.

5. Our attitudes

a) Cultural relevance

Libraries have been written about this: of course, we are not to be conformed to the world, but we have failed to have our minds sufficiently transformed to understand the world. Never mind understanding the young (has any older generation ever been able to do that?): congregations find it hard to understand the mind-set of their peers. Britain has for practical purposes been a post-Christian society for at least 2 generations and although early Methodism touched parts of society that others barely reached in its early days, it apparently lost touch with 'the working class' in many areas from the mid-nineteenth century on and the part of middle class society it did reach drifted into the seductive arms of the affluent society of the '50s and '60s. Tragically we are now often seen as having little or nothing to offer our culture apart from a few "good works": as decent if odd slightly odd and old-fashioned people with church halls available at low rents.

b) "Survival" mentality

The combination of feeling ourselves as "outsiders" (even without any overt hostility), the pressures of running an organisation, raising finances and the understandable need to support and encourage one another to keep going can easily lead to - not necessarily a loss of vision (most of us know what we are really here for) but a practical inability to do any more than keep on keeping on.

c) Aversion to change

In a chronically stressful situation we all want change for the better. However, the actual process of changing and being changed -even for the better - actually increases stress. At least we know where we are now and there are some benefits such as the feeling of belonging to a small group. We do not want to risk that feeling of security and in any case, change seems to demand still more effort for uncertain results.

This is not meant to be a criticism: it is how we behave as human beings. It is hard to make the trade-off between current discomfort and uncertain future gain, except that we are supposed to have something called faith in a God who makes all things new - and better.

Even when some are willing and prepared to change they can all too easily be held back by those who are not, and it is all too easy for even a small minority to be (often unintentionally) obstructive.

d) Weariness.

This is subjective and affects different people and different churches in different ways to a differing extent at different times. Of course, we believe that "they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" and 'will soar on eagles' wings'¹⁰ and often taking time out and deliberately waiting to see the divine perspective helps but when the church continues to decline? This weariness - even when not allowed to become unwillingness - will affect the way we do things. Leaders especially find it hard to keep pushing up hill without apparent result and potential leaders may be deterred from coming forward or even decide that they would be more effective and less pressured in another church.

¹⁰ Psalm 103 v5 also about having our youth renewed like the eagle's. It has been suggested that this is actually a reference to the phoenix – the unique bird that at the end of a long life allowed itself to be destroyed by fire in order that it could be reborn from the ashes.

e) Lack of confidence

We have already touched on this in the context of society's pressures. But all of the above contribute to a vague awareness we are not doing what we are meant to be doing, a concentration on "keeping on for the sake of keeping on", fatigue and the sense that even when we want to change it is just too hard. So our confidence in ourselves, the future, even in God is undermined. And if our spiritual life is already weak as well...

f) Spiritual aspects

The church as a whole, communities of believers and individuals are all called, like Timothy, to "guard the gospel"¹¹. How effectively we are doing this is something to reflect on in depth rather than in this paper but without a firm foundation of Biblical truth we are trying to build on sand. And if we need "reformation" in this respect we also need revival: "a life brought into its proper relationship with the Holy Spirit" (Francis Schaeffer 1969)¹²

It is not appropriate to comment here on individual churches in this context – it is a matter for each church and each member to seek God's assessment of where they are. The "Gateways to God" process was intended to give an opportunity for churches to undertake "assisted reflection" on this. Some make troubling reading. Indeed, some churches did not respond at all which may say a lot in itself.

Summary so far

There are similarities between us as a circuit and some High Street retailers. We have an essential product that everybody needs whether they realise it or not (even if some insist it is positively harmful and actively seek to have it taken off the shelf!). But we have persisted in a retail model that worked well 50 years ago but is inappropriate in a world of different expectations. Our marketing strategy is outdated and (with some exceptions in individual outlets) unattractive. Our outlets are expensive to operate in terms of finance (both direct costs and central overheads) and human resources. Keeping the shops open and complying with the increasingly complex regulatory environment takes up most of "manager" (minister) and "staff" (members) time. Rationalisation (closing outlets, cutting costs, reducing managerial staff) has not helped a great deal and continuing falling "sales" and declining income can only mean that we are heading to a position where closing more stores and then "going into administration" is the inevitable result. The prospect of this impacts on morale and the risk of losing faith in the product which only exacerbates the situation.

From "The Methodist Recorder On-line" – Quarter 3 2027

The last but one Methodist church in the former Lincoln circuit closed last week. Membership had fallen to 15 and the senior steward said that "We were just too old: I had been doubling up as treasurer for 18 years and at 93 that's just too much. We love the Lord and most of us would like to go on traveling in to the one church left for as long as we can."

The surviving church retains a membership of 42 but has only a part time minister as it cannot afford a full time individual even if one was available. It now forms part of the East Midlands circuit of 25 churches which have an average membership of 33 and a member average age of 68. Many of the former buildings have been transferred to so-called New Churches that have grown dramatically since the "revival" of 2021/22, though many small rural buildings have been converted to residential accommodation.

¹¹ John Stott's title for his commentary on 2 Timothy in "The Bible speaks today" series (IVP).

¹² "Death in the City" p10 (IVP). He speaks of the need for reformation as a restoration of pure doctrine, a return to the teachings of Scripture and revival, a restoration in the Christian's life. Together these would be revolutionary in individual lives and the church, evangelical as well as liberal.

BUT... it does not have to be like this.

Our situation - opportunities

General

1. "Darkness before the dawn?"

There are hints that God's Spirit is moving. There are churches that are growing - even Methodist ones in our circuit! There is a growing sense in society that the secular promises of individual freedom and fulfilment "if only we get rid of an obsolete patriarchal fundamentalism" disregard the risks of throwing out the essential baby with the dirty bathwater. Some people are beginning to sense the hole in their lives even if they do not yet realise it is God-shaped.

The economic insecurities of a post Brexit vote world and the very real fears of the apparent collapse of the model of a mutually supporting society that has been caring for the vulnerable and seeking the good of all citizens may also be beginning to make people think of where they might be able to find the sense of safety and belonging that is an essential for a fulfilled life. It is in times like these that people can become more open to good news.

2. Whatever the apparent national attitudes to the need for Christians to conform to current views of 'political correctness,' at local level councils and voluntary organisations appear anxious to involve 'the church' in helping meet needs that cannot be met by the state alone. There are areas without street pastors that have asked for them to be set up. Churches have taken in the homeless. Christians Against Poverty is often quoted positively in the media. Of course, this is not necessarily because 'they' suddenly accept our core values, but they do see how these core values express themselves, and we have a structure actually on the ground (premises, people and organisation) that can respond to need.

Of course, we need to be careful we do not simply become another volunteer organization "sorting out the problems because society as a whole doesn't want to pay more tax" or dropping the proclamation of the truth from our holistic ministry "because that might offend people (and risk outside funding)". But the openings are there, and the needs will increase: think of the epidemic of loneliness affecting not only the isolated elderly but so many in middle age and the young as well. If we are to respond to the call of God to be his Kingdom people we need to be working now to have the right structures (in all meanings of the word) in place.

Specific

We can only give a few current examples. Individual churches will (should) know of more. But at circuit level:

1. The Eden project on St Giles

We know (some of) the needs of estates like St Giles. We have had a faithful witness there for years. Now we have the opportunity to work with a specialist team with years of experience of bringing the presence of the Kingdom, expressed in life alongside local people as well as "traditional" acts of love and witness.

2. There is already extensive new housing development in Witham St Hugh's and Hykeham and it will be followed by very much more – at least 4,500 homes between Bracebridge Heath and Canwick, the area north of Birchwood, Greetwell Quarry, Welton and that is only a sample. People moving into new areas are usually open to change - for a short period. We have a mission field moving to us and a possible opportunity to work with other churches to meet it.

3. The city centre has already changed a great deal. The university continues to expand (a new medical school is due to begin admissions next year) and is planning to increase the number of postgraduate students, many of whom are from overseas. Tourism is increasing, buildings along High St are changing use. We could not and would not want to act alone but as part of the Greater Lincoln Active Faith Network¹³ – who knows what could happen? The Well at Bailgate has already shown how a drop-in approach consistently staffed can bring people in.
4. The villages are changing. In some the population is ageing- with loneliness, transport and care issues. In others young families are moving in, schools are expanding and need volunteer help. We still have a presence in many of these communities and in Ingham with a Messy Church that attracts half the primary school (and their adults) and a monthly café church we have a model of how we could do things differently in terms of sharing the Good News.
5. For those who are struggling -and they are increasing in number -there is a need for more CAP type work. Once the related Release programme for those with addiction problems is established and known, demand will rise. Who else but the church has the truly life changing answers?
6. In the face of social isolation, the church offers relationships. In the face of the void behind modern secularism the Gospel gives true answers to the question of the meaning of “life, the universe and everything.” And the answer is a Person we can relate to – not a theory to receive.
7. As Christians we face like everyone else new challenges in technology and ethics – Artificial Intelligence, genetic engineering, the environment. People are already asking questions and beginning to live with the changes. Do we have people who can answer questions, help God’s people through the maze, remain committed to God’s truth whilst being able to see all truth is God’s truth?

Of course, most individual churches as at present constituted and resourced in terms of people, skills and finance cannot easily take up these opportunities and challenges on their own. Not even the Circuit could be involved in more than a limited number of projects, which in itself gives the opportunity to work with others who share our core beliefs and see themselves as disciples of Jesus too, though their personalities, experiences and gifts may be different to our own.

Discerning what our calls are will be a challenge and actually taking the steps necessary to follow those calls an even bigger one (although there are more resources and experience available than ever for us to learn from and use). And of course, it will mean stopping some things we hold dear and being ready to be re-skilled and renewed. But if we are serious about being disciples...

Those people and churches already involved in some of these things are finding the overall “feel” that goes with that involvement is very different from much of their previous experience and need support to ensure they not only remain true to “core Christian values” but continue to be spiritually empowered to fulfil their call in the world outside Sunday service and fellowship group.

¹³ Who are launching their “Vision into Action” programme on November 15th.

Strengths

It is right to move on to the considerable remaining strengths of the circuit before considering how these strengths might best be used to meet the opportunities.

1. Our people

Although our overall membership is declining, we are - taken together – still one of the biggest churches in the area. We have an established ministerial team with a range of skills, gifts and experience who are looking to give the lead we need. The nature of Methodism means we have an unusually large number of lay people able to preach, lead worship and carry out the management tasks needed (even with the provisos set out above) and we do have many members who are committed to regular worship, service and prayer. Above all we are God's people, called out of darkness to declare his promises (1 Peter 2 v8). Of course, we are not perfect in commitment or discipleship, but the potential is there!

2. Our networks

If some of our current situation is partly due to the tendency for each church to see itself as a self-sustaining entity with circuit as a somewhat nebulous concept, there to provide a minister and The Plan, we believe that there is also a growing awareness of our need and capacity to network. This has been helped by all the preparation for the new circuit and our learning from each other. We are beginning to realise that the body of Christ is on a wider scale than the local church. Most of us accept that not all churches can or should do everything either in terms of types of worship or specific ministries on their own and need to work together in some way.

Working together at an administrative circuit level has always happened: now there is a growing acceptance that to be effective we need to work in geographic localities (e.g. city centre), "missional" specialisms (e.g. work with children and young people, food banks), "training and teaching" (e.g. Alpha or marriage courses that are attended by people from different churches) and even in being ready for different churches to focus on different types of worship. This is at once reassuring – we don't need to do it all – and challenging – we have less excuse for saying we can't do it at all. A networked church, which in effect is what we are looking at here is simply another way of being the body of Christ spread across more than one congregation.

The nature of networks is that one member – individual or church - may have different links for different purposes. Some "members" will have lots of links and becomes "nodes" – a focus for one or more types of activity. These relationships and nodes can change with circumstances and time and in our context it will be important we do not become too bureaucratised – we need to be more like water, pourable into different containers as needs change rather than being like concrete, pourable for a limited period but then setting into a new - but unchangeable - way of doing things and repeating the past mistake of assuming that form determines function¹⁴.

3. Our growing awareness and readiness to challenge and change.

Although change is never easy and often only happens in response to crisis we as CLT do detect at least the beginnings of a realisation that the crisis is upon us¹⁵ coupled with more confidence that because -unlike the rest of the world – we have an unchanging foundation, a God who has promised good to his people wherever they might find themselves , we can and must risk change without excessive fear of consequences and cost.

¹⁴ Something all institutions are having to learn. Change is always scary but who except God's people can go into it with the ultimate security knowing that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever" (Hebrews 13 v 8)?

¹⁵ Since the first draft of this paper several new issues have arisen that reinforce this belief.

We know we can't go on as we are: we know God has made promises. Yes, we accept there will be a cost but that it is more in the nature of a guaranteed investment rather than a leap in the dark.

4. Our readiness to try new things

This is beginning to show in some churches in practical ways. Moorland Park and Bailgate have invested in premises that are being used to both reach out and bring in. There is a readiness to experiment with new forms of preaching and worship. Café church at Ingham is now making contact with more people than the chapel had done for years. There is outreach in service (CAP, foodbanks etc.). It does not always work – Messy Church at Nettleham never took off – but then not all experiments do and even when they don't God is training the people involved and giving experience that will be useful in future,

5. Our community base

Even though we no longer have as many "outlets" as we did we still have a considerable local presence. Of course, the modern concept of community is less geographic than it was and many of our congregations have a considerable "gathered" element but we are still in a position where we are accepted and, in some areas, still act as a community hub (or at least have the potential to be). Buildings do have a role: they are symbols as well as useable assets. And this is not just that our buildings can be a place for local non-church organisations to meet but some churches still have local credibility as a caring group that contributes to "the peace and prosperity of the city" (Jeremiah c29 v7): it's just that we are not good at explaining just why we care and contribute.

6. Our God

Although retail analogies may help us understand our mission we are of course a franchise, not an independent chain! We are working and living for a Person who is the way, the truth and the life that our communities desperately need (whether they realise it or not) and who is with us and in us and goes before us into his world.

What is to be done?¹⁶

"One fact is incontrovertible: our dwindling place within contemporary British culture demands of us that we fashion a radical response now which bears all the hallmarks both of the Apostolic age of the early church and those characteristic of the birth of Methodism. The time for being single minded, focussed and resolute in our faith and discipleship has arrived. We are the ones upon whom the responsibility has fallen to take our rich heritage and bring it alive once more. We are about nothing less than reformation and revival." (Crossings Out- Hull (Centre and West) Strategic Review 2013-14)

So far, we doubt there is anything in this paper so far that many others in this circuit (and elsewhere) have not been saying for several years. However, it is important we understand at least the outline of the issues before considering ideas for the ways we should use our remaining strengths to take advantage of the God-given opportunities whilst at the same time being realistic about our weaknesses.

¹⁶ The phrase is 'borrowed' from a 1902 pamphlet by V.I. Lenin, subtitled "Burning questions of our movement". He said the paper was a 'skeleton plan to be developed in greater detail' which seems to fit! Why should the devil have all the best titles?

Having examined our situation CLT believes we need to make decisions about how we begin to answer, “What is to be done?” if we are to avoid superficially easy solutions that do not really address the issue¹⁷

1. A deliberate commitment to assessment and action

First, we need to be really honest with ourselves, as individuals, churches and a circuit. If we agree with all or most of the above are we prepared to actually do something to change the direction of decline? Words will not be enough. Are we willing to accept giving up current ways that no longer deliver transformed lives? If we do have the right truths are we ready to express them differently? This will be painful: but if we fudge the issues yet again CLT believes we really are looking at the end of the circuit and most of our churches as anything more than a historic relic. The “Gateways to God” challenge to churches is already making us ask hard questions but unless we commit to doing something with the findings we will simply repeat the pattern of analysis without action that has (literally?) bedevilled us for years.

2. A deliberate decision to be prepared to move from our current pattern of independent local churches to new patterns of working together in some form of networked circuit.

By this we mean that we need to accept not only that no one church can do everything but that to do anything churches must deliberately form relationships with each other. We must become in effect a “circuit wide church” that can provide a comprehensive range of ministry and support services. Ideas of how this might work in practice follow in the ‘Ideas’ section. From a ministry view point one or two individual churches might focus on children and young people’s work, another might have a ministry to older people and be a resource for others wanting to be reach out into their community.

However, this ‘sharing of ministry’ networking will not solve the structural problems of lack of people to take on roles such as safeguarding or treasurer, a lack of financial resources in an individual church or the shortage of ministers. The CLT believes that churches need to network organisationally as well. There are several ways this might be done, and some possibilities are listed in the ‘Ideas’ section. It will be the decision of individual churches as to whether and how they link to others, but we are convinced we simply cannot continue to operate as 18-20 individual churches if we want to fulfil our potential rather than die out piecemeal.¹⁸

This does not mean we are planning to ‘solve” the problem by a mass closure of church buildings: there is no reason why a networked church organisation could not have several different congregations in several different buildings if that is the best way to meet its God given calling. And some churches that are at risk of closing in the next few years are in locations that are potentially mission opportunities where the circuit might well want to maintain a presence by keeping a building open.

3. A deliberate decision to focus our resources

The CLT believes all this will mean developing a strategy that concentrates on those churches with the desire and at least some capacity for mission, even if they need additional circuit support to fulfil that call.

¹⁷ “For every problem, however complex, there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong” (H. L. Mencken)

¹⁸ 18 churches- at least 36 church councils a year. Would this be the best way to use 3 ministers?

They would become “centres of mission” to use the Hull terminology.¹⁹ The circuit as a whole would concentrate resources for mission through these churches and their networks (whether geographical or ministry).

Other churches would become ‘centres of fellowship’²⁰ This means accepting they already struggle to keep going and where the loss of one or two key people would result in closure. This is not to say they are ‘second best’ let alone failures, but we must be realistic and acknowledge that at this time the best way ahead for some is to recognise what they already are and place where their emphasis on mutual love and support which overflows flows into the community on an individual and informal level. It is likely that such a church would be best placed to become part of an organisational network with a larger church. As a congregation of a larger church it might still have coffee mornings and regular services but would not be a prime focus for wider scale missional outreach supported by the circuit, though of course we would want it to be involved in it as much as they could be.

This means that churches will need to decide what sort of church they are at present, what they are called to be and how that calling can best be and followed through in terms of networking both in ministry and organisation with other churches. This will not be easy for either churches or circuit. We will all need to be honest about our vision, capacity and present activity, rather than looking back to the past or indulging in wishful thinking of the “if only we had” type. We might even benefit from an outsider taking a dispassionate look at individual situations.

And of course, there is nothing in the future to stop a “centre of fellowship” becoming a “centre of mission” in the future once the Holy Spirit starts moving!

4. A deliberate decision to focus the work of ministers on growth.

Growth in numbers and discipleship are key parts of what we are. Maintenance and meetings are means to that end, but much ministerial time is taken up in in them. More effective use of our ministerial resources will be especially important if – probably when - the number of ministers is further reduced, if that is a decision imposed on us by District because of the needs of other circuits²¹. Indeed, we believe the circuit should be planning to be ready to become a 3 full-time equivalents minister circuit within 3-4 years. It could be accomplished partly through churches coming together organisationally and also by encouraging the use of local church pastors who would take prime responsibility for the “centres of fellowship”, working with particular local preacher(s).

5. A deliberate decision on the circuit’s main missional outreach in the next 3-5 years.

We must not spread ourselves too thinly. This means we can only take the lead as a circuit in 2 or 3 major initiatives. We are already committed to city centre work: The Well is established, and the next step may be a project “downhill”, perhaps different in nature but with the same aim of reaching out. This might best be accomplished with others, probably by working with the Active Faith Network.

¹⁹ Hull Centre and West had a rigorous approach to the requirements for being recognised as a ‘centre of mission’ that required objective evidence rather than aspirations – it appears as an appendix.

²⁰ We are not altogether happy with the terminology of “centres of fellowship” and “centres of mission” churches – all local expressions of church should be both – but it has become part of the discourse and does indicate a differentiation we know exists.

²¹ Would we dare to set an upper limit for the number of “societies” under a minister’s charge in order to maintain “missional ministers”? 21 churches mean at least 14 church councils a year for each minister ...

The Eden on St Giles Project is already a major commitment. Here we are taking a lead but are bringing in a skilled team and working with an ecumenical partner who shares our vision.

Another initiative might be the launch of a new sort of church in an area of housing growth: what does a 21st century church in the “new suburbs” look like? Fresh Expressions has expertise in this area and we are beginning to explore ideas with the United Reformed Church in the Bracebridge Heath/Canwick area.

If we are truly “all one in Christ Jesus”, sharing a common vision of reaching out to those who do not know Jesus, believing that he is the way, the truth and the life, that he died and rose again and that this is his world and we are called to share the grace we have been given, then labels won't matter and we can rejoice in the way the Methodist parts of the body of Christ work with the others.

Such projects will demand long-term commitment: they might involve churches offering resources (including people) they will find it painful and costly to give and accepting that other projects cannot expect as much circuit funding and support as we would all like them to have.

Even if we make all these decisions as a circuit we will not find them easy to implement. We will all need sensitivity, understanding and compassion but once we are convinced that we are following the mind of God then we also need courage and determination. The CLT truly believe that *“The time for being single minded, focussed and resolute in our faith and discipleship has arrived. We are the ones upon whom the responsibility has fallen to take our rich heritage and bring it alive once more. We are about nothing less than reformation and revival.”* And it could be like this...

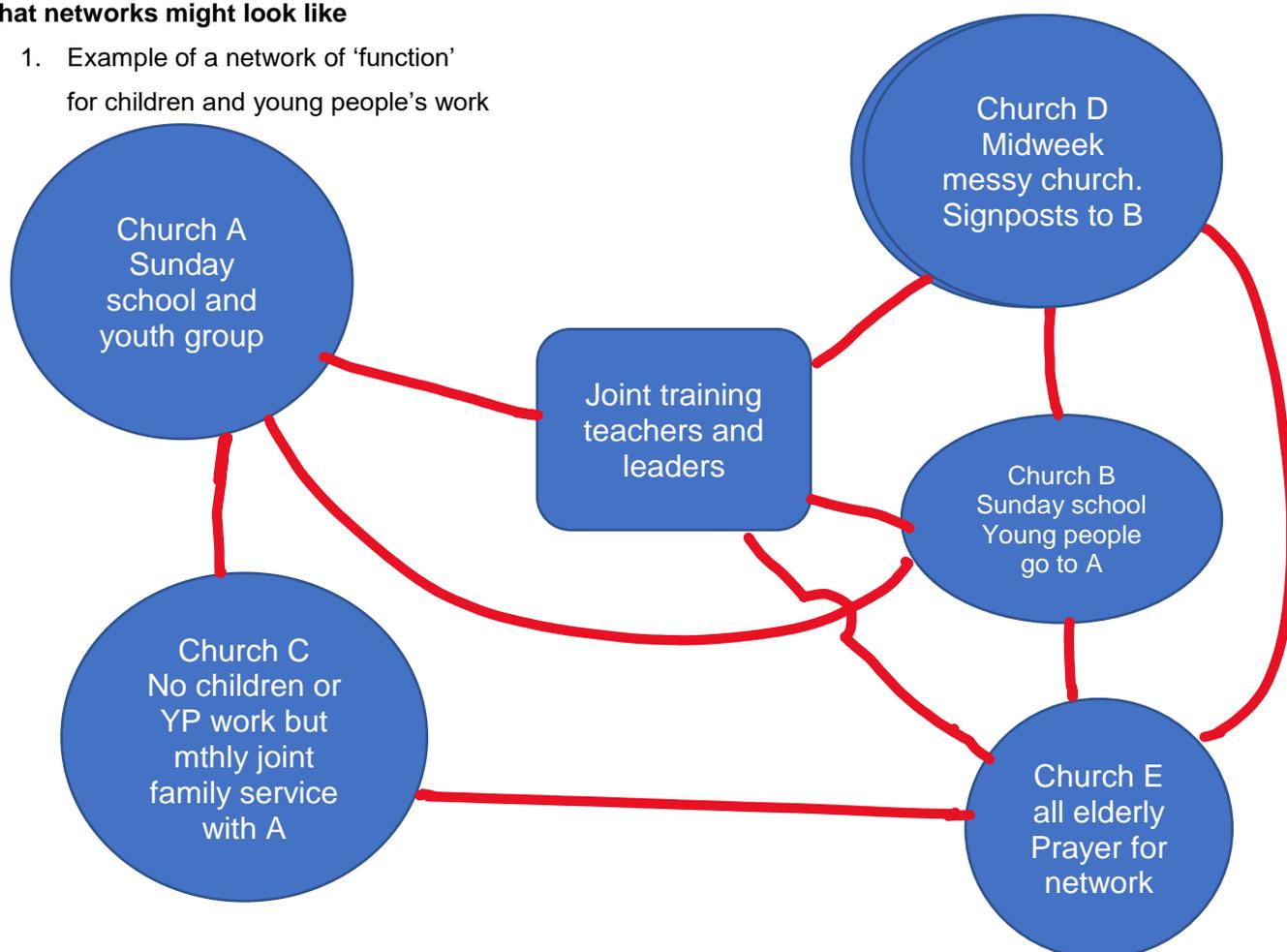
From “The Methodist Recorder On-line” – 10th September 2027

The Lincoln Circuit celebrated its 10th anniversary and 1000th member last week with the opening of its third new church in 5 years. Situated in one of the new housing estates that have sprung up around the city it is already a community hub sharing “tea and truth, love and life skills in the context of a gospel of grace” with a variety of people many of whom have never been in a church building before. This is very different to its last project in a large retirement community but the same principles of everyone across the circuit sharing gifts and resources and working together to “build up the body of Christ” have been in action. The new churches have been welcomed by local leaders. One is quoted as saying “I don't know what the Kingdom of Heaven they talk about is but if it's like this then bring it on”. The circuit church as it likes to call itself is already working with other Christians on a plan to transform a large empty retail space into a Christian arts and recreation centre with the slogan “Life as it was meant to be”.

Ideas

What networks might look like

1. Example of a network of 'function' for children and young people's work



2. Networks - ideas for structure

The table on the next page is not an options list but possibilities to provoke thought and discussion. There are probably several others and none except 2 and 3 are necessarily appropriate for the whole circuit. It could well be appropriate to have a mixture – a large church with a single congregation, another with 3 or 4 congregations, a church made up of 2 or 3 merged congregations, another two who remain as single congregations but share a treasurer and safeguarding lead.

The ideas assume 3 ministers in the circuit- the likely scenario by 2021 – for illustration but are equally relevant now with over 5 whole time equivalents.

For each possibility it will be worth each church thinking through how it might help not only their current situation but how it might enable them (or not) to fulfil their mission. Individuals will want to consider what each might mean to them – what would be the role of a local preacher in possibility 2 or 4? How might you run a joint church council?

For clarity: Church = independent entity with church council – “Society”

Congregation = group of people gathering for worship – where communion is celebrated – “local body of Christ

Building = place of worship. Not necessarily traditional “church” – could be school, village hall, a front room

Stones Place and the LEPs are not included

1	“as we are”	18 churches	21 congregations (2 at Nettleham, Ingham Messy Church and café church)	17 church buildings (excluding C. Willingham)	3 ministers .av 6 churches each + LEPs	18 church councils (CC), 18 leadership teams (LT)
2	“All together”	One church	One congregation	One building	3 minister team	1 church council with single LT
3	“Hub and spokes”	One church	Several congregations	Several buildings (possibly more than one congregation in one building)	3 ministers – link to specific congregations	1 CC with 1LT drawn from all congregations
4	“Several centres”	2-3 churches	2-3 congregations	2-3 buildings	1-2 ministers per church	2-3 CCs each with own LT
5	“Hubs and spokes”	2-3 churches	At least some churches have more than one congregation	Several buildings (probably one congregation in one building)	1-2 ministers per church, look after all its congregations	2-3 CCs each with own LT drawn from all congregations
6	“local clusters”	4-6 churches	Some churches have one congregation, others more	Several buildings (possibly more than one congregation in one building)	1 minister has 1-2 churches	4-6 CCs each with own LT from all congregations
8	“Local mergers” (could be part of 3,4 or 5)	1 church merges with a neighbour	1 or 2 congregations	One building (may keep others for local mission)	1 minister has 1 less church for each 1 on one merger churches	1 church council with single leadership team
9	“sharing people”	Churches share key people	Not necessarily any change	No change from sharing key people	No changes in number of churches/minister	No changes in number of CCs or LTs but some people report to more than one CC
10	“joint church councils”	2 or more churches have single joint council	No change in congregations from this on its own	No change in number of buildings form this on its own		Number of church council meetings decreases for ministers. Leadership teams share work

There is also the possibility of ‘outsourcing’ where individual churches hand over specific functions e.g. treasurer to someone else (circuit or outside agency/individual for a fee. This is not really networking though it might be necessary in an emergency, probably as a step to some form of formal sharing of people or merger.

It should be noted that the 2 sorts of network do not necessarily coincide. There could be one church with several congregations, one of which meets away from the biggest building but has the whole church’s children’s work based there, whilst ‘passing’ on young teenagers to another church altogether.

Next steps

This paper has analysed the situation the CLT believes the Circuit is facing and has laid out the decisions we believe the circuit needs to make to move forward. It has outlined ideas for changing to becoming a networked circuit for both ministry and structure. It will be a starting point for further discussion by churches and the Circuit meeting.

The Circuit meeting in March 2019 will need to decide whether or not to take this forward as a circuit although there is nothing to stop individual churches working or even deciding to merge with each other at a local level. If the Circuit meeting does agree with the need for action along the lines of this paper then the CLT will need to work closely with churches to help them work out whether they are 'centres of mission' or 'centres of fellowship', their particular calling and how that calling is best developed through networking. At the same time, we will need to maintain a circuit wide strategic view, particularly as regards ministerial numbers and 'big projects'

We thought of 17/18 as a "year of establishment" after the 2 circuits came together and if we see 18/19 as a year of preparing to move on with God then CLT believes we need to see 19/20 as the year we begin to develop a networked circuit which is stepping out into God's plan for us. Appendix 2 suggests a possible timeline.

Conclusion

In the last 30 years we have seen several moves to restructure, reform and revive the work we as Methodists have been called to do in Lincoln and the surrounding villages. Our efforts have done little more than slow our decline as an effective missional people of God,

We are now at a critical point. Becoming one circuit was the right thing to do but we knew from the start that it had to be more than a restructure if there was to be a real change. This paper has spelled out why real change is needed and what it could look like.

Now it is time to move on to working out what is to be done - and then doing it. Not to ensure the survival of an organisation but to make the saving love of God known in the place he has called us to, in such a time as this. It will be difficult, sometimes painful – but who ever said that following Jesus would be easy?

The CLT commend this paper to you for thought, prayer and action.

Appendix -A timeline for “What is to be done?”

Although the exact timings cannot be fixed and will need be revised as we go on the CLT agreed that 18months- 2 years would give us a sense of urgency whilst being realistic. (It took about 18 months to bring the 2 circuits together once the decision had been made).

History so far

March – May 2018

First version of the document produced and discussed by CLT

May 2018

Circuit meeting - “Introductory Letter” distributed with circuit meeting papers to give advance notice that bringing the circuits together was only a first step.

September 2018

CLT discussed a revised version at their Away Day and agree with the contents and conclusions.

Circuit meeting informed that churches will be receiving “What is to be done?” soon.

Timeline starts

November 1st2018

Document distributed to churches to read, think and pray about before the launch meeting.

November 27th

Launch meeting at Moorland Park for church stewards, leadership teams and others: questions, discussions and ideas.

December 2018- January 2019

Churches explore the implications. They may want to meet together to do this – CLT members will be available to come and answer questions and facilitate meetings if churches want them. There may be other discussions between churches considering local networking and at circuit level.

February/March 2019

Spring church councils come to a provisional conclusion of whether their role should be as potential ‘centres of mission’ or ‘centres of fellowship’ and how they might relate to other churches both in ministry and as organisations

March 18th, 2019

Spring Circuit meeting decides whether to adopt the approach of “What is to be done?” as a circuit and if so, agrees that the Circuit will continue to facilitate the work needed.²²

March 25th

CLT reviews the decisions made at circuit meeting and agrees on a ‘facilitative action” programme. This would include

²² If the circuit meeting does not so decide individual churches could still come together to develop local networks

- a) Working with churches to test out and take forward their “centre of mission’/’centre of fellowship’ vision
- b) Helping churches who want to network their ministry
- c) Helping churches who want to integrate or network their organisation
- d) Identifying circuit wide work that needs resource form several churches and elsewhere

April- August 2019

Work through implementation of church decisions.

September 1st, 2019

1 ‘network” of ministry’ in operation

2-3 existing churches organisationally networked or formally merged

September 1st, 2020 – Comprehensive “networked circuit” operational

Appendix B – Hull (Centre and West) Circuit criteria for a church to be ‘centre of mission’

‘we believe that we are called together by God to be Spirit-led, with a heart for Jesus and a passion for mission.’



The Methodist Church - Hull (Centre and West) Circuit Registered Charity Number 1132962

Application from Church Council for designation as a Centre of Mission

NB. All applications need to be approved by the Church Council

Each of the churches is invited to self-designate as either a Centre of Mission or a Centre of Fellowship. On the recommendation of their Church Councils, prospective Centres of Mission will need to apply to the CLT on the form below. Churches will need to provide substantive evidence of meeting three or more of the mission objectives specified in the Circuit Mission Policy:

- a Making new disciples and growing in discipleship
- b Establishing fresh expressions of church and church planting
- c Initiatives in mission-shaped ministry
- d Community focused social action
- e Work with families, young people and children, and older people
- f Reaching the missing generations
- g Building community cohesion

Note: These are faith-based missional objectives. Simply renting out church premises to groups, without a dimension of faith engagement, is not mission in the accepted sense.

CLT will make recommendations on designation ratification to the Circuit Meeting.

Churches seeking designation as Centres of Fellowship are not required to complete the form but are asked to let the Secretary of the Circuit Meeting know (by letter or email)

Appendix C – Membership and attendance figures 2002- 2017²³

Membership (M) and Attendance (A)								
	2002		2007		2012		2017	
	M	A	M	A	M	A	M	A
Bailgate	116	68	144	97	102	78	76	80
Bracebridge Heath	25	33	25	34	25	25	33	19
Burton Rd	27	32	42	24	41	63	33	24
Central	109	55	87	44	69	40	56	43
C. Willingham	15	17	18	29	21	23	14	16
Monks Rd	64	41	45	38	38	23	37	32
Moorland Park	87	54	72	50	70	44	53	32
Navenby	24	30	54	36	53	42	37	34
Nettleham	119	85	111	94	104	69	94	68
N. Hykeham	69	49	53	52	67	35	37	34
Reepham	35	32	29	43	37	30	27	20
Saxilby	66	57	70	43	59	48	42	30
Scothern	12	18	12	18	16	18	11	12
Skellingthorpe	38	26	40	28	27	25	17	11
St. Giles	51	48	32	30	26	33	26	22
Swallowbeck	96	44	68	51	74	51	55	40
Washingborough	71	41	55	42	53	41	54	49
Welton	53	46	60	39	59	48	54	51
Total (excl. LEPs)	1077	735	1017	792	971	736	756	617
LEPs								
Thorpe on the Hill	10	15	8	9	6	17	4	18
North Scarle	7	15	6	14	4	0	6	4
St Columba's	38	24	10	33	0	23	9	20
Total LEPs	55	74	34	56	10	40	19	42
Current Circuit total	1132	809	1051	848	981	776	775	659
Closed pre-2017	238	189	118	109	54	39	-	-
Circuit 'area' total	1370	998	1139	957	1035	815	775	659
% fall since 2002			17.1%	4.1%	24.5%	18.4%	44.4%	34%
% fall from 2007					9.1%	14.8%	32%	31%
%fall from 2012							25.2%	19%

Notes

- 1) The increase in numbers in some churches in 2007-12 e.g. Navenby is probably partly due to transfers from closed churches
- 2) LEPs are included for completeness. The membership reflects Methodists, the attendance includes all who worship there.
- 3) Churches closed pre-2017: Bassingham, Birchwood, Branston Booths, Ermine West. Harby, Heighington, Ingham, Potterhanworth, S. Clifton, Stow, Sturton, Waddington, W. Parade, (13)
- 4) Membership usually exceeds attendance: the housebound and those away exceed those attending who are not members
- 5) The rate of decline has increased again in the last 5 years: membership is 25% and attendance (including LEPs) 19% down on 2012, the biggest 5-year decreases since 2002
- 6) Churches should do their own calculations to compare with the circuit total

²³ Figures are taken from the Connexional website. Attendance figures are for Sundays, all ages using the October count

Acknowledgements

The CLT is especially grateful for the Hull (West and Central) and Stockport Circuits making their strategic plans “Crossings Out” and “Grounded in Faith – Growing together in Jesus” respectively) available on line and commend them to those who want to explore further.

We are also grateful to Jonathan Stubbs for his degree essays “A critical evaluation of Church Growth Theory” and “An Exploration of the relationship between the Methodist class system and John Wesley’s ‘social holiness’”.