

“What is to be done?”

Meeting the challenges facing the Lincoln Circuit

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On behalf of the Circuit leadership Team

Shortened version

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This is the shortened version of the full document “What is to be done?” which has been written to lead us as circuit, churches and individuals into the next stage of our journey with God. It contains a summary and the main recommendations along with ideas and conclusion but leaves out the detailed analysis of our current situation and the appendices other than a timeline. If you want to read the whole document, it is available on the circuit website or you can ask your church leadership team or steward to either email it to you or give you a paper copy.

“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 you will go on to read the sections 'What is to be done?' and the 'Ideas' and 'Next steps' and 'Conclusions'. It will be very helpful for church stewards and leadership teams to read the full version 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.

What is to be done?¹

"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)

We doubt there is anything in the paper that many others in this circuit (and elsewhere) have not been saying for several years. However, it is important we understand at least summary 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.

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 issue²

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.

¹ 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?

² "For every problem, however complex, there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong" (H. L. Mencken)

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.³

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. They would become “centres of mission” to use the Hull terminology.⁴ 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’⁵ 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.

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

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 circuits⁶. 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.

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

⁶ 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 ...

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...

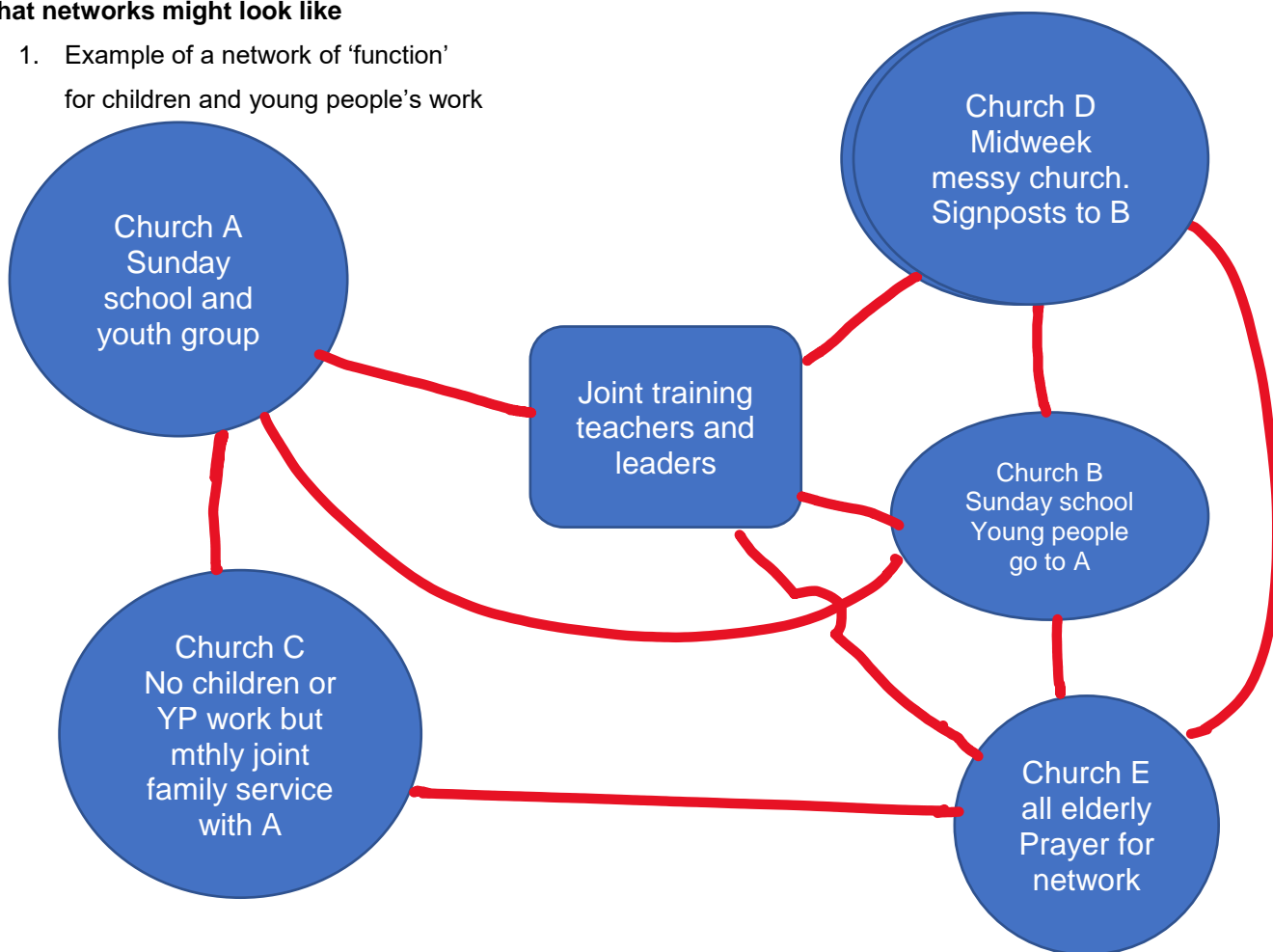
From “The Methodist Recorder On-line” – 10th September 2027

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.⁷

⁷ If the circuit meeting does not so decide individual churches could still come together to develop local networks

March 25th

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

- 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