



THE CUMBRIA DISTRICT OF THE METHODIST CHURCH

Consultation about forming a single Cumbria Circuit



A. Introduction

Thank you for your commitment to seeking to be part of God's purposes in Cumbria. As together we work out what this means, and how as Methodists with our ecumenical partners we might best achieve it, one relevant theme has concerned how we might best share or relieve some of the time and energy spent on governance, administration and trusteeship. Similar business, meetings, and office holder responsibilities are replicated in many places. With fewer and fewer people available for this, there is less capacity or ability to focus on ministry and mission.

This reflects a wider movement, which in the Methodist Church has recently been focused through its Oversight and Trusteeship process. This has led:

- at national level, to a significant streamlining of our connexional arrangements;
- at District level, to the Cumbria District merging with others in September 2024 to form a North West England District¹;
- at local church level, to more congregations merging to form multi-site churches under a single church council, with others likely to move towards this in future.

All this has begged a question at circuit level: what might be the best configuration of circuits in Cumbria? This question has arisen periodically over the years, but two particular factors have prompted present thinking:

- the merger of the Cumbria District provides an opportunity to consider how best we might shape ourselves for the season ahead, including how might we best preserve our Cumbrian identity to join in God's mission in this county; and, in particular:
- how might we best preserve our commitment to and participation in the ecumenical county, with its God for All vision and programme?

Various groups and several Synods have reflected about this and wondered whether, rather than continuing with incremental circuit amalgamations (since 2008 we have moved from 15 to 8 circuits), it might be better to form a single Cumbria Circuit. The Synod appointed a group to consider and develop possible reasons and proposals. These were shared at an open Gathering Day in July 2023. Opinions varied, with some naturally hesitant; but a clear majority endorsed moving forward with the idea. The District Policy Group ('DPG') [*and the September 2023 Synod*] therefore decided to hold a formal consultation under the relevant Standing Order 501. This means that, **by the end of March 2024, every Circuit Meeting and Church Council in the Cumbria District is asked to consider the proposal to amalgamate existing circuits to form, from September 2025, a single county Cumbria Circuit.**

This paper seeks to explain, in the following sections:

- B. the consultation process – see p.2;
- C. some of the thinking by addressing some 'Frequently Asked Questions' – see p.4; and,
- D. the possible future circuit arrangements – see p.7.

None of this is a 'done deal' nor just 'top down': that is why we are holding a formal consultation, both to arrive at a decision, but more so to continue to work out collectively what the best way forward might be, both the big picture, and some of the interlocking details.

At heart, in our reflecting and conferring, we are trying to work out and catch the movement of the Holy Spirit: **what is it that we are being called to?** For God to use Methodists in Cumbria, working alongside and

¹ When the present district structures were adopted in the 1950s, the average membership was c.30,000; the average membership now is 5,500; Cumbria's membership is presently a little over 2,000. The NWE District will comprise the Bolton & Rochdale, Cumbria, Lancashire, Liverpool, and possibly (subject to a further consultation) the Manchester & Stockport District.

with others, how might we better use and prioritise our time and resources for God's purposes? Consider this also please, therefore, an invitation to pray.

A Prayer for the Cumbria Circuit Consultation

Jesus said to the disciples – “Let us go across to the other side” (Mark 4.35)

Almighty God, we rejoice in your faithfulness over the years, as you have guided us as a District, and still lead us.

We turn to you, Jesus Christ, who calls us to step out in faith and journey to the 'other side', wherever you may lead us.

We may face storms and challenges on the way, as we seek your way with integrity and grace; for you call us to follow you alone.

Loving God, by the Holy Spirit, bless us with unity and hope, that we, and those whom you call us to be amongst and serve, may flourish.

Open our hearts and minds to your call and way, we pray, that your Kingdom may come.

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

B. The Consultation Process

On the next page a Flow Chart summarises the overall steps and process involved, from when Synod first considered the issue in April 2022, to when – but only if approved – the new Cumbria Circuit might commence in September 2025. We have reached the formal consultation stage.

The relevant Standing Order (501) ensures that every church council and circuit meeting has the opportunity to vote on the single Cumbria Circuit proposal. The DPG and the Synod have asked that this should be between September 2023 and the end of March 2024.

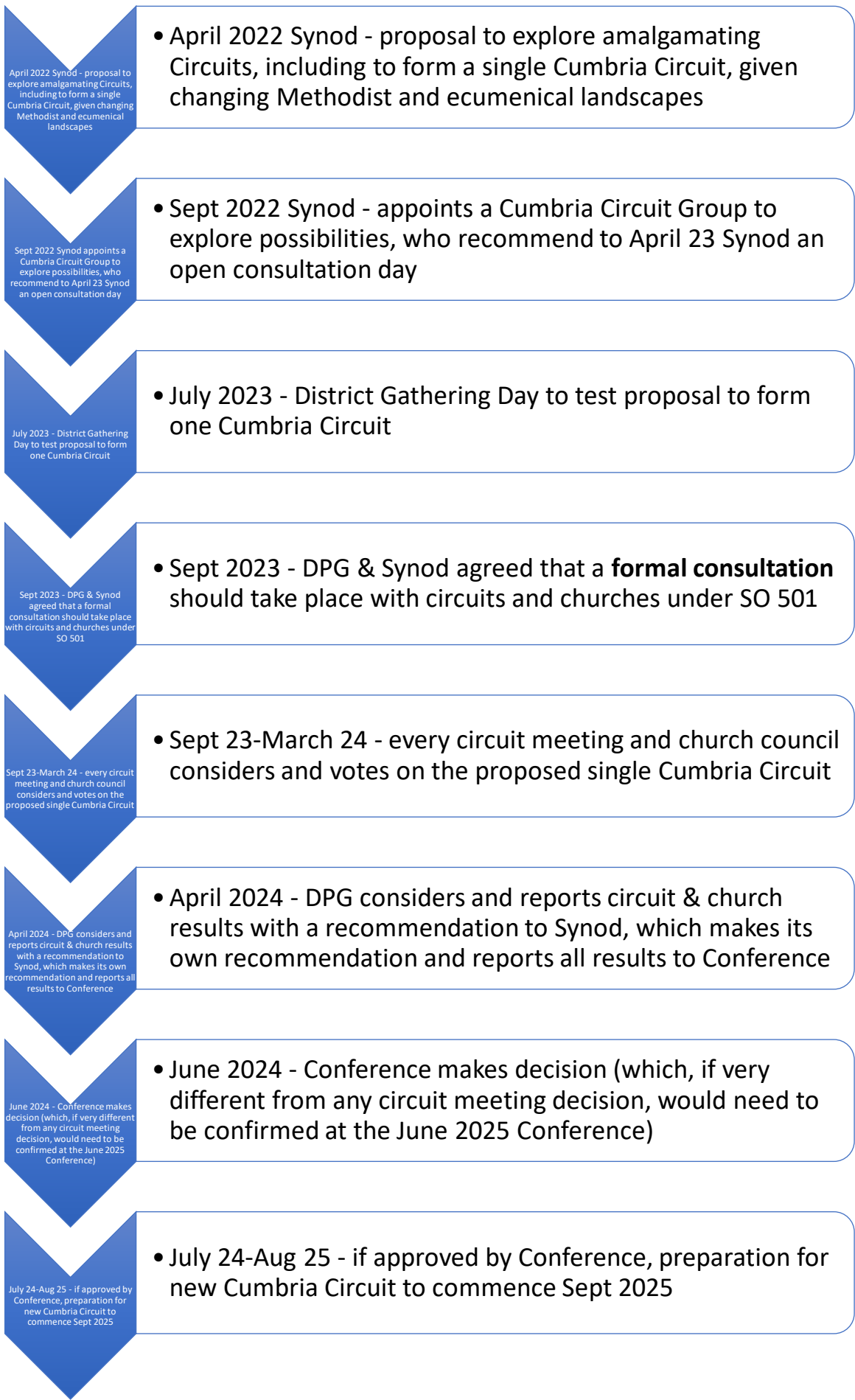
An introductory video should be shown at every circuit meeting or church council, and this consultation paper should be distributed to all members of every such meeting, to help ensure a level platform and consistency for everyone to make their decision. If additional questions arise during the consultation, these would be fed back. If helpful, a further document, such as some more 'Frequently Asked Questions', might be prepared in response. If so, that would again be sent to every meeting.

In every context it will be important to assess how best to use the time between September and March to become familiar with the proposal and the reasoning behind it, so as to consider and vote wisely. Many places and meetings may wish to consider it more than once, perhaps by presenting the proposal at one meeting and then discussing and formally voting on it at a later meeting; or, a special meeting might be arranged to present and discuss the ideas, perhaps bringing together several congregations, or those with particular ideas to contribute or concerns to raise, from within or across circuits, before voting later in church councils and circuit meetings. This might necessitate rearranging or holding extra meetings from your usual pattern, and, if so, thank you for doing so, as collectively we seek to decide wisely and well.

Members of the District Cumbria Circuit Group and others would be available, if asked, to support your consideration of the proposal by helping to explain aspects of it (whilst leaving you free to make your own decisions). More widely, the Learning Network and others can help us to wrestle with possible change, especially if we find that possibility unsettling. So, if any outside support might be helpful, please ask. Generally, however, we are expecting circuits and local churches to understand and work out how best to undertake the consultative process in their own contexts.

Ultimately, every church council or circuit meeting needs to vote on this **resolution**:

The [x Circuit Meeting or y Methodist Church Council] resolves that, under Standing Order 501, the Cumbria District Policy Group and the Cumbria District Synod be asked to recommend to the Methodist Conference of 2024 that the existing Circuits in the Cumbria District amalgamate to form a single Cumbria Circuit from 1 September 2025, and that, if the Methodist Conference approves the amalgamation, all necessary steps be taken for its implementation.



Please forward the results of the voting (numbers in favour or against, and of those present and entitled to vote) to the District Administrator (cumbriamethodistdistrict@outlook.com) as soon as reasonably possible, and no later than 31st March 2024. If any meeting has any general comments to make about the proposal, or about some of the possible details of the proposed future arrangements that might constructively help to develop them, please submit these concisely in writing if possible, or through verbal feedback.

The DPG will consider the results, report them to the Synod, and make a recommendation. The Synod will consider the reported votes and make its own recommendation to the Methodist Conference of June 2024. The Conference will then consider the matter and make a decision (and may also give consequential directions). Any circuit meeting or church council within the county may make their own separate representations to the Conference. If the Conference judges that its decision is substantially out of accord with the reported resolution of any circuit meeting (rather than church council), the decision will need to be confirmed at the following Conference in June 2025.

If Conference approves a decision to form a single Cumbria Circuit, it will be prepared for in 2024-25, and come into being on 1st September 2025. Otherwise, present circuit arrangements will remain, or be subject to any further proposals that might subsequently emerge.

C. Frequently Asked Questions

[The section included here in the September 2023 Consultation paper has been omitted since the Frequently Asked Questions were further developed and shared at different points during the year in the light of comments and questions received. The April 2024 version is now included for the Synod in a separate document. No other part of this document has been changed from that circulated for consultation with all the church councils and circuit meetings in September 2023.]

D. Future Circuit Arrangements

A possible model for a Cumbria Circuit's is summarised in the Structure and Functions Chart on the final page. Work will continue to develop the details, including in the light of responses through this consultation, but the underlying principles are:

- to free local churches for ministry and mission;
- to engage and participate in the county ecumenical God for All Vision and Strategy and local Mission Communities; and
- to align with the North West England District structure and its proposed Ministry & Vocations, Mission & Leadership, and Administration & Compliance Hubs, and the various sub-functions within them.

In all aspects, we need better to embrace technology to support various processes, from functions such as Plan-making to improving our digital communication, in every respect. We need to use the tools available to operate in bigger units, whilst locally providing and ensuring personal pastoral connectedness and support.

With each area or function we will work out the 'infrastructure' and arrangements that might be required. A basic pattern might involve a circuit steward or portfolio-holder with a particular overall responsibility, working with a small team of officers with particular sub-responsibilities within that portfolio, relating and communicating to a wider network of related church officers, who may gather occasionally as required. There are good examples elsewhere, but we want to devise what will work well in the Cumbrian context. All arrangements will need to be efficient, effective and proportionate, making use of economies of scale, blending county and local working as required, and prioritising what is required (not devising limited value roles or committees, etc.). The structure will need to be flexible and dynamic, able to evolve and respond to changing needs.

Ministry and Vocations

This would focus on ensuring good ministry and vocational encouragement throughout the Methodist congregations. A workable, focused but agile staff structure will be key to effective delivery. Ministers and laity would hopefully be more released to minister and offer pastoral care.

Where there are particular ministries to be supported or offered (e.g. support for probationer ministers, or offering of chaplaincy), the connections with the NWE District, or county ecumenical networks, would be made, to help connect with or focus resources as required.

Mission and Leadership

To be effective, mission must be delivered locally, as it will vary from place to place. A countywide structure must therefore support local mission, including through applying national, regional and especially county ecumenical God for All initiatives. Ultimately, mission must be Spirit led.

Within the Cumbria God for All strategy, Mission Communities development is a priority. In the new District structure, a countywide circuit will enhance our status as an ecumenical county and help drive the required changes. The County Superintendent, supported by Deputies, should enable greater consistency and cohesive leadership across the county.

Administration and Compliance

A consistent strategic approach to supporting these functions is required, with investment in and the use of technology a key to the efficiency of the proposed structure. Consistent and efficient compliance with legislation should help free up local resource for mission.

Central Support and Communication

Careful consideration will be needed to determine what admin support is provided centrally and what remains local, with sensitivity (and respect for employment rights) towards those currently employed in such roles. Digital communication with all members able to receive them, would be developed. There is no reason why we can't communicate directly with every member on a regular basis, thereby contributing to better pastoral connectedness and care.

EDI, GDPR and Safeguarding are important issues that will benefit from a degree of central oversight and compliance. Some of this involves database management – ensuring support and information is available to allow local churches to fulfil their obligations at a local level.

Finance

This will be one of the most difficult areas to achieve countywide consistency and will require a high degree of trust and letting go of local resources for the corporate good. Transitional arrangements may be necessary where assessment methods are different (with good examples from county circuits elsewhere). The challenge of balancing books and/or using reserves to supplement ministerial and other costs will only become more difficult without radical change.

Finance might be overseen by a Treasurer (with overall day to day responsibility); an Assistant Treasurer (e.g. responsible for a functioning Assessment model using spreadsheets to aggregate and adjust several factors to enable a fair setting of assessments); an employed or outsourced part-time financial administrator (to process transactions etc.); a Circuit Finance Group (meeting periodically for budgets, assessments, accounts); a small group to consider Circuit Grants; an annual Church Treasurers Meeting (to consider budgets and assessments). The current circuit treasurers will play a vital role in bedding in the new arrangements.

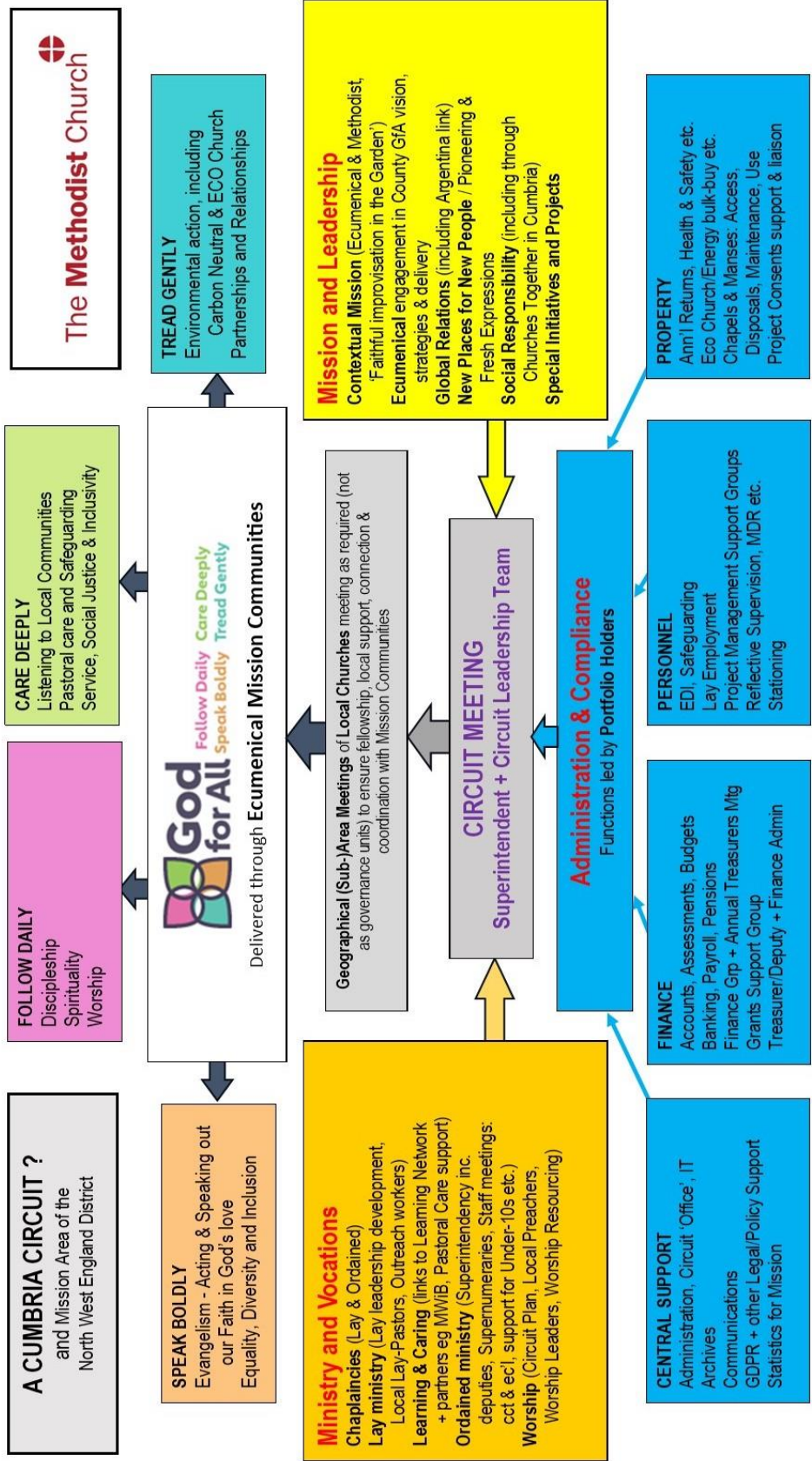
Personnel

A supportive centre to ensure consistent compliance with legislation and required support for lay employment recruitment, or ministerial stationing, will be required.

Property

Around an overall property portfolio holder there will need to be either geographical or thematic support: e.g. officers responsible for property maintenance and repairs support; development schemes; disposals; inspections; annual returns; manses (or a lead manse steward with other local manse stewards); the core group might meet e.g. quarterly, and with church property stewards e.g. annually.

A supportive central framework will assist sometimes isolated local churches, e.g. providing lists of surveyors or tradespeople, but without precluding the use of trusted local contacts for maintenance work. Local churches will still have their continuing responsibilities, but supported by the new Circuit and District arrangements.



Explanatory Note for Circuit Functions and Structure Chart (version 7 - 12.6.23, with some alphabetical ordering used above for evenness):

1. The Circuit would also be the Cumbria Mission Area within the merged North West England District, blending wider Methodist with the ecumenical county commitment in order to support Local Churches and Ecumenical Mission Communities. Local churches may also meet in local area support meetings, & are encouraged to engage fully in MOs.
2. The Circuit meeting would comprise Church reps (pro rata for membership), Circuit Stewards & Officers, plus Ministers, and meet 3 x's p.a. (at a weekend + circuit service?).
3. The Circuit's Admin & Compliance, Ministry & Vocations, and Mission & Leadership functions reflect and would draw from the NWE District Hub resources. The various functions or subfunctions would be led by portfolio holders/circuit stewards or other officers, and involve groups or networks as required.
4. The Circuit Leadership Team would comprise the Superintendent (who will also be the Mission Area Lead/Deputy District Chair) + ? 3 ministers (?Deputy Superintendent(s) & reps) and ? 6 circuit stewards responsible for specific functions, plus others to attend if required for relevant business.