

# CONSULTATION ABOUT FORMING A SINGLE CUMBRIA CIRCUIT

**Frequently Asked Questions – April 2024 update** (of Section C. of the Consultation Document: updates are in italicised type, with some previous points re-ordered).

## Why are we doing this?

- A desire for a more **missional** shape to our structures, to afford more time for ministry and outreach in each of our communities: centralise the administration, keep the mission and ministry local. *Strong support for economy of scale, share skills, and particularly to concentrate on the mission.*
- To lessen the **burden of governance** and trustee responsibilities with the centralising of those offices that can best be done once by an experienced team, rather than the present duplications with us all having to fend for ourselves with each circuit struggling to recruit lay officers to cover all the roles. *A recognition that we can't survive as we are.*
- Recognition that we have a number of one or two minister circuits. This leads to a lot of **duplication** (of work/meetings) at Superintendent level, and makes it difficult to recruit (as the ratio of Supers to ministers nationally is not 50:50!). *A desire to free up superintendents to use their gifts.*
- A strong desire to maintain the **identity** of Cumbria, with the planned merger of Districts.
- To preserve and help develop our County **ecumenical relationships** and God for All vision.

## Why a single county circuit?

- The District Cumbria Circuit Group's assessment is that one Cumbria-wide Circuit is the best option.
- Recognising that most circuits are struggling from one or several perspectives (although assessments about this sometimes vary!), the expectation is that some further mergers amongst the now 8 Cumbrian circuits are likely still to need to happen, and thus we are presently in an ongoing piecemeal process that perhaps should be accelerated to a place of eventual rest. *A desire from many superintendents to **do this once**, rather than take time and energy merging time and time again for years to come.*
- We have considered alternatives, such as merging to form between 3-5 circuits. However, once a circuit reaches the size of a North Cumbria or Western Fells Circuit, the distance from one end of the circuit to the other is such that circuit life and relationships are already different in some respects from the old circuits. To move to a single circuit, rather than to 4-5 circuits, involves, probably, not a big difference. *Any alternative to a single circuit involves a number of circuits within the new **Cumbria Mission Area** (that will form part of the new North West England District).*
- Many circuits are already beginning to work together, plus in the new District configuration, a county circuit meeting would **replace the focus that the Cumbria Synod** would have previously offered until August 2024. A Cumbria Circuit would provide a natural means of consulting within the county, that only being the Cumbria

Mission Area within the North West England District won't as easily provide. A county circuit would thus also potentially strengthen Cumbria's part within the new District.

- A major reason for moving to a single county circuit would be to **remove internal Methodist circuit boundaries** that mostly do not align well with ecumenical Mission Communities, hindering their development or focus upon them (see more below).

- ***Why have we not been offered more than one model to vote on?*** – *The Synod appointed the Cumbria Circuit group to consider the possibility of different models.*

*The group recommended that only a single Cumbria Circuit model be developed because it combined far greater advantages than any 'half-way house' given the reasoning set out above. The Synod, comprised of representatives of the circuits, agreed with the reasoning and recommendation, and overwhelmingly agreed that this should be the model consulted upon.*

*There has still been a choice of two options: a single Circuit, or leaving things as they are with the possibility of further local and bilateral circuit mergers if needed or desired.*

- ***Won't a larger organisation be less effective and more bureaucratic?*** – *Whilst this can of course be true, other examples, including of larger circuits, illustrate that greater efficiency and less bureaucracy can result from removing replication and by the sharing and ensuring of greater expertise through a merger, releasing time and energy to focus on local mission and mutual support.*

### **What about ecumenical relationships?**

- We have consulted and kept our ecumenical partners at county level informed about the possibility. With the movement of District level to the North West (in line with similar Salvation Army and URC arrangements at the equivalent level), moving to a coterminous Cumbria Circuit, Carlisle Diocese (Anglican), and Cumbria Mission Partnership (URC, within their NW Synod), would **facilitate working together**.

- We and our ecumenical partners recognise that removing internal **circuit boundaries** within the county might help the development of Mission Communities. At present Mission Community, Anglican Deanery and Circuit (or United Area) boundaries rarely coincide: a few do, but most circuits presently relate to several Mission Communities, hindering engagement. Also, Mission Community mergers are expected in the years ahead, creating further internal boundary changes. Removing the complication of circuit boundaries within the county will help with this, and help to advance ecumenical development, to which the District has long been committed.

- Increasing participation in **Mission Communities** means that, in time, the local Mission Community and its fellowship, meetings and mission, might become the natural organising unit and focus for local Methodist churches in each area. Thus Mission Communities meetings might replace circuit meetings as a focus, and removing local circuit meetings would avoid duplication. (Pending reaching that stage of Mission Community development, local sub-area Methodist meetings may be helpful in some places, as suggested below.)

- *It is recognised that Mission Communities are not working well in all areas; a new circuit will need to work with those churches who might work better initially as a section or sub-area than as an ecumenical gathering.*

### What will this mean for meetings?

- Experience of county or very large circuits elsewhere suggests that overall the **number of meetings will significantly reduce**.
- The aim is to widen our governance structures so that in some respects they move up a level. The new **Circuit Meeting would be, in size, shape and nature, akin to our current Synod**, meeting perhaps 3 times a year on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon (with tea and an evening service) to cover all the governance matters dealt with by our present circuit meetings, and allowing a focus on mission across the county. (This would reflect an overall movement of structures and upwards and outwards, through a regional district and a county circuit.) Overall, there would also be fewer numbers of circuit committees.
- Some meetings will of course involve more travel for some attendees, but, again, **overall the amount of travel will be reduced** through fewer meetings, together with the use of hybrid and online options where appropriate.
- The current circuit meetings could be replaced by a number of **sub-area meetings** to facilitate local relationships and mutual support, fellowship and outreach (they would not have governance functions). This is not another layer, but a more nuanced differentiation of how and when some meetings might be more business-focused and others might be more fellowship-focused. The need for sub-area meetings may diminish over time with increased participation in Mission Communities, and might also sometimes be impacted upon by the development of **multi-site churches** under single church councils (which in some cases are already partly replacing previous fellowship at circuit level).

### What about our minister and lay workers?

- *How will personnel be stationed, and will we have less ministers and paid lay workers?*
- As a rule of thumb, nationally, there is one minister per 150–250 members. So, the **number of ministers** should not be affected by this proposal.
- *The process of ministerial invitations and **stationing** will remain the same, with local churches offering input into the writing of profiles by circuit stewards, and ministers matched via a national process*
- *The number of **youth and family and outreach workers** will remain determined by vision and budget, and ability to support.*
- With the centralisation of administration, it is intended that local ministers, lay workers and churches can focus their efforts on **local mission** and ministry.

### What about a Superintendent minister?

- Experience with county or very large circuits elsewhere has suggested that having a **single superintendent** minister with the oversight and leadership of a circuit, rather than a co-superintendency, generally works better.
- *You are likely to **see the superintendent** as often as you currently see the Chair of District for preaching, and a little more often for other things (since a District Chair also has to spend time on national responsibilities).*
- Given that Cumbria will also become a Mission Area within the new NWE District, to be led by a Mission Area Lead/Deputy District Chair, to avoid confusion, the

county Superintendent should also be the same person. It would then mean that ecumenical and secular partners, as well as Methodists, would have **clarity as to who the local Methodist county leader is**.

- The single Superintendent must **work collaboratively**, with lay and ordained colleagues, including with a team of perhaps up to 4 Deputy Superintendents (who might be geographically focused, or have a responsibility for a particular function within the new circuit).
- Even with collaborative working and support, it is not anticipated that the Superintendent (with their combined role also as a Mission Area Lead and Deputy Chair) would have capacity to have pastoral charge (or even shared pastoral responsibility for) a congregation: they would probably be a 'separated' Superintendent.
- *It is suggested that current Superintendents will retain their stipend until at least the end of their current period of invitation.*

### **What about the Circuit Plan and Local Preachers?**

- Preachers will usually continue to **preach in their local area**, not around the whole County – much as many do now in sections – and would use the Chrestos Plan-making tool to support the Plan-making process, which has proved efficient and effective in other similar contexts.
- There will be a Circuit Local Preachers meeting at county level, including to provide a **critical mass for training** that most present circuits are individually unable to provide. However, some of the time local preachers will still be encouraged to meet locally for fellowship, in a pattern of meetings that will not add 'an extra layer' and probably even out to present frequencies, but with the advantages of both a wider scale and continued local fellowship.
- The proposed model (for preaching, as also will be the case with some other functions) will thus allow local working, whilst keeping oversight, training and provision of some resources at a county level. *Again, it is not the intention to ask Local Preachers to travel further.*

### **Won't this mean that roles are larger?**

- Yes, and no. The numbers of people have declined, so that the new county circuit roles will often be similar in size to circuit roles that were held 30 years ago; overall, we will need **fewer numbers of circuit officers**.
- There may be some roles that will be paid, as we **pool resources** to employ people with expertise to deal with the larger regulatory burden now required under UK legislation. *There are concerns about cost – but the need for people with expertise is there whether we merge or not; a single circuit allows for pooling of resources and economies of scale.*
- Some roles may be shared, including through property and finance committees, enabling people to **share their experience**, rather than relying on one local person to be the expert in everything (e.g. sharing expertise in making our buildings energy efficient), and achieving economies of scale.
- Some may be ready to lay down roles and responsibilities and 'retire', but we hope that some will continue their circuit offering and be stimulated by the new configuration and collegiality; that others may concentrate their service on

continuing responsibilities in Local Churches; and that others will use the opportunity to refocus to support ministry and mission in other ways.

### **Why now, and why implement in September 2025?**

- If by the summer of 2024 the decision has been made to move to a county circuit, the **balance of considerations** suggests that implementation would be best in September 2025.
- If the Conference approves in June 2024, there would not be sufficient time to prepare to implement in September 2024. The Standing Order also includes a provision for the matter to come back to the Conference if necessary for a second time, so we cannot implement before September 2025 anyway.
- Some might prefer a later date (e.g. September 2026), but others want an earlier date because of stationing (e.g. whether to seek a new superintendent or not), or other considerations in their circuits. So, September 2025 represents a compromise, including that the advantage of a longer preparation time does not outweigh the reasons for not waiting as long as until September 2026.
- If there is merit in moving to a county circuit and we can be sufficiently ready by 2025, why wait longer for getting on with it? In particular, if becoming a county circuit helps to preserve the Cumbrian identity and helps engagement in and promotion of the ecumenical county, why delay any more than a year after the inauguration of the NWE District?

### **Whose decision is it, and what happens if not all circuits agree?**

- Ultimately it is the **Conference's decision**, which will carefully consider the views expressed.
- If several circuit meetings and many church councils vote against, the DPG and Synod are likely to be cautious about proceeding or making a **recommendation** to Conference to do so. Alternatively, if there is significant support, a recommendation to proceed is more likely.
- Whatever the final District recommendation, church councils and circuit meetings can make their own **representations** to the Conference (either way). If the Conference judges that its decision "*is substantially out of accord with*" that of a circuit meeting (rather than a church council), the Conference would need to reaffirm its decision the following year in June 2025 (*Standing Order 501(7)*).
- Hopefully, significant **consensus** emerges through the consultation. If in favour, our path forward becomes clearer; if against, further consideration will be required for navigating our present challenges.

### **What about losing our own circuit's identity?**

- Some will naturally be concerned at losing something of their **present circuit identity**, or control over their affairs and resources.
- Our hope is that each part of Cumbria's membership and identity will still be expressed in various ways, through involvement variously in **ecumenical mission communities, multi-site church arrangements, and sometimes sub-area meetings / sections**. *For example, a former circuit meeting may choose to continue*

*to meet: it will no longer have governance and trustee responsibilities (potentially a relief given that many are struggling to continue with or replace key officers), but will have more time and space to concentrate on mission and mutual support.*

- In any event, we hope that members from the different parts of Cumbria will feel sufficiently confident in their own voice and identity to play what will be a valued part in the new arrangements.

*This will include different theological preferences and voices, in which our commitment as a Methodist Church is that we continue to seek to live well with our sometimes contradictory convictions. Those different perspectives differ but also connect right across the county, more than might presently be realised. A Cumbria circuit might enable appreciation and better connections to be made, whilst sub-area and sectional meetings will still enable local identity and solidarity to be expressed if desired.*

- *Will **Rural churches** be much smaller entities in a large Cumbria Circuit, with their needs and voices diminished? – The great majority of congregations in a Cumbria Circuit will be small, of which most will be in rural contexts. The majority of voices in the circuit meeting will be from these contexts. Representation from local churches in the circuit meeting will be able to ensure that the new circuit is attentive to the needs of all the congregations and contexts, collectively working out how to respond to those needs in practice.*

### **What about finances?**

- We hold the **financial, people and property resources** that God has given us as 'stewards' and trustees, not for our own benefit or purpose, but for God's. Methodism is a connexional movement: we are ultimately one big family together, working things out and collectively deciding on the best use of resources for the benefit of God's purposes. This invites an attitude of generously sharing and letting go, that there might be life. However much our instincts might sometimes be to hold onto something, or to be suspicious of what might happen or of how others might decide things, in listening, talking and working things out together, hopefully trust can grow, and become justified.

- *How will **assessments** be calculated? – See the video (<https://youtu.be/b0-T7DvpALY>): it is likely to take account of a number of factors and seek to be fair, with any adjustments taking place over time.*

*There is realistic understanding that the ability in most places to **fund assessments** is diminishing, and at connexional and District levels assessment rises have been held back or reduced out of consideration for circuits and local churches. The representatives from local churches on the new circuit meeting would ultimately have the power collectively to agree or reject proposed assessments, and it will be a common need to ensure that finances are sensible and sustainable.*

*Experience of large circuits elsewhere suggests that they are better positioned to ensure a **fair assessment level**, and with greater resources to give particular support when justified for congregations who suddenly struggle. If needed, adjustments between the levels from previous circuits, and for the churches within them, have usually been introduced, in a sustainable rather than sudden manner, with attention always given to the 'ability to pay', so as to ensure fairness between what are, after all, different groups of Christians.*

*We do not yet know whether much adjustment over the next half decade may be required in Cumbria, or not very much at all, but for decades the present Circuit Treasures have been meeting annually, so there is already a long established basis for mutual trust and understanding: we – all members and local churches – would be in this together, concerned for each other's interests, and the furthering of God's mission.*

- *How is **funding going to be allocated**? – Decisions about ministry and mission costs and projects will be determined over time by the new circuit meeting (and thus voted on by the representatives of the local churches), considering the overall needs, fairness and priorities. The intention would be to honour commitments given by existing circuits for at least the initial term of those projects and thereafter where possible and still justified.*
- *Will **professional costs** increase assessments? – The level of costs presently being incurred by the circuits would be available where still justified to ensure the effective operation of a Cumbria Circuit. If any additional costs need to be incurred above this level, including over time to support the needs of local churches and such costs are proportionate and justified, the overall available circuit finances would be considered, including from property income and disposals as well as general reserves, in order to provide for any additional costs, rather than seeking to raise church assessments for this purpose. Again, the new circuit meeting will determine these matters, and will be largely composed of local church representatives.*
- *Experience elsewhere has shown that **pooling resources** from constituent circuits can provide more than the sum of the parts: collective reserves levels can overall be lower than the combined reserves levels of many smaller 'pots', or more resources can be pooled to invest in more mission, such as through more (and sometimes more appropriately ambitious) projects and personnel.*

### **What about local churches?**

- *What about **Managing Trusteeship**? – This will remain as defined in CPD, and will sit with the new circuit meeting and existing church councils. There are no planned changes to church councils in terms of a new circuit 'policy' directive (any multi-site church schemes to combine church councils will be a matter of local choice or sometimes necessity according to the principles and processes in Standing Orders).*
- *What about **representation** in the circuit? – this will continue to be via your elected circuit representatives and minister, including for smaller churches.*
- *What happens to **individual church administration**? – It stays the same, although local church mergers and multi-site church arrangements may address or help with any local concerns.*
- *If local churches will still need local church roles, how does the proposal help, since they won't be **released** from them? – This is a proposal to reorganise our circuits, to share and reduce the overall amount of roles, processes and administration that is required. Moving from 8 to 1 circuits (even one that will require more to function than a traditional sized circuit) will offer a significant saving. Not as many people will need to double or triple up their responsibilities in church, circuit and district roles. Locally, multi-site arrangements may also help to reduce and share some responsibilities.*
- *Won't a large circuit be more **remote**, meaning for example that a non-local circuit property steward might not understand or respond as quickly to a local church's problem? – In designing a county circuit's structure, the intention is to ensure that*

*wherever circuit advice or support may appropriately be required can be given as, or more, effectively. This will involve teams sharing skills and pooling knowledge, including of different chapels and contexts. Since several circuits no longer have the necessary local officers or available replacements, the choice may be between a breaking down of the present system, or a new one that has been found to be as or more effective elsewhere.*

- *Examples of the **larger church resourcing local churches?** – There are examples outside Cumbria of larger congregations supporting smaller ones (with worship, property, finance administration, stewardship etc.) or of circuits helping smaller local causes in specific ways. In Cumbria there are growing examples of multi-site arrangements (e.g. in North Cumbria and Sedbergh Circuits), mutually supporting each other with trusteeship and administration, and sometimes of larger congregations beginning to support smaller congregations in various ways.*