

Proposed Amalgamation to form a new District in the North West Consultation with Circuit Meetings and Synods

Summary of content:

Aims	The Bolton and Rochdale, Cumbria, Lancashire and Liverpool Districts have proposed amalgamating to form a single district from 1 September 2024. In January 2023 the Methodist Council approved the necessary process under Standing Order 401, including that there should be a formal consultation with the circuit meetings and the synods of the four districts, with the intention of bringing the proposal to the Methodist Conference of 2023.
Main points	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The proposed resolutions for circuit meetings and synods 2. The rationale for the proposal 3. Resourcing mission and governance 4. Financial modelling 5. Timeline and further work
Background	The recent history and context is summarised in Appendix 1.
Consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Regional Review Group (RRG) was appointed in 2020 to develop ideas for district integration and (if approved) implementation. The RRG includes the district chair and another representative from each district, appointed by their respective District Policy Committees (DPCs). The present members are Revd Dr Sheryl Anderson, Steve Cooper, Revd Darren Garfield, Revd Phil Gough, Peter Gregson, Carolyn Hothersall, Dave James (observer), Revd Dr Andrew Lunn, Revd Dr James Tebbutt, and, as facilitator, Alison Ball (Coordinator of the NW & Mann Regional Learning Network). • The initial proposals went to DPCs and to the 2022 Spring and/or September Synods of each District. • Three open consultations called ‘Shaping the Future’ took place in the region in the Summer 2022 inviting anyone to attend and contribute their ideas. • Formal consultations with the circuit meetings and synods need to take place before the end of April 2023. • In addition, the RRG warmly invites the Manchester and Stockport District further to consider the proposals, on whatever timescale might work for them (for background regarding this, see Appendix 1).

1. Proposed Resolutions for Circuit Meetings and Synods

Each circuit meeting and synod in the four districts is asked to consider this report and to vote on the resolutions below (substituting the name of the relevant circuit meeting or synod for the ‘x’ or ‘y’ below), and recording the total numbers of those voting and the numbers in favour or against. The meeting date and numbers should be reported to the relevant synod secretary, for sharing with the respective synod and with the Methodist Council scrutiny group (which is due to be appointed in March 2023).

1.1. The [x] Circuit Meeting [or [y] Synod] receives this report.

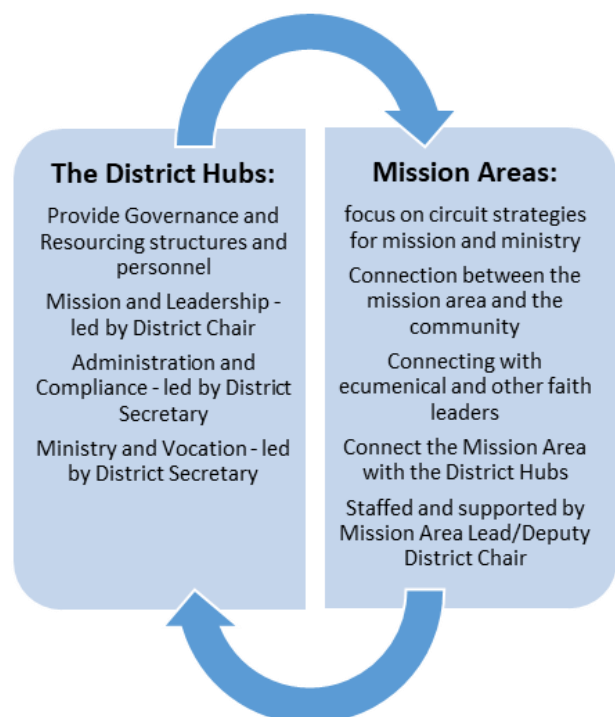
1.2. The [x] Circuit Meeting [or [y] Synod] resolves that, under Standing Order 401, the Methodist Council be asked to propose to the Methodist Conference of 2023 that the Bolton and Rochdale, Cumbria, Lancashire, and Liverpool Districts amalgamate to form a single Methodist District from 1 September 2024, and that, if the Methodist Conference approves the amalgamation, all necessary steps be taken for its implementation.

2. Rationale for the formation of a single district

- 2.1 The Districts in the North West and Mann region have a history of co-working and covenant, which has strengthened and enriched each partner. The membership is dramatically smaller than when the present Districts were first conceived, and is likely to become smaller still should present trends continue (see Appendix 1). The governance burden of current structures is disproportionate to our size. It is challenging to fill the offices, lay appointments, and meetings.
- 2.2 In the 2024-5 connexional year we anticipate several changes in district leadership as, of the four incumbent District Chairs, two will retire, and the interim appointment of another will end. This proposed amalgamation is a proactive alternative to what are otherwise likely to be reactive interim measures. Instead, an intentional amalgamation will enable the adoption of an innovative approach to being district, with mission placed at its heart.
- 2.3 Notwithstanding the vote of Conference 2022 which removed the immediate expectation of a collectively mapped journey toward reduction in the number of districts overall, the reasons for the North West proposal remain both valid and pressing, and Standing Order 401 remains available to those districts who wish in any event to proceed with reconfiguration.
- 2.4 At the core of the proposal is a desire, not simply to bolt districts together so as to undertake the traditional pattern of being a district but over now a wider area, but rather to 'do district differently'. The vision is for collaborative leadership and interconnectedness; for using resource hubs that provide sound governance and serve the circuits in their particular contexts; for a 'matrix' approach to enable similar and specialist ministries and missional initiatives to connect across the region; and for arrangements and resources to be sufficiently flexible and nimble to respond to present and emerging mission opportunities.
- 2.5 By providing sound governance and effective resourcing, the desire is to release energy and personnel from maintaining the present district structures, to enable circuits better to focus on mission in their localities.

3. Resourcing mission and governance

- 3.1 The District will have a single synod (with representative and presbyteral sessions), and a single DPC to act as the district trustees (supported by a District Scrutiny Group: further details of all the envisaged arrangements are set out in the separate Appendix 2).
- 3.2 Three District Hubs are proposed: Administration & Compliance, Mission & Leadership, and Ministry & Vocations. Different subfunctions in the three hubs will be carried out through volunteer or paid posts, groups and networks, to fulfil the responsibilities given to districts under CPD and to resource circuits for mission. The District Chair and two District Secretaries will lead the hubs, as shown in the diagram, and will do so collaboratively, within and between the hubs, and with the Mission Areas.
- 3.3 The larger district will still require sufficient local relationship and expression. Therefore, Mission Areas will be used to cluster groups of circuits together geographically, but they will not hold governance responsibilities or add a governance layer to the structure (so even if sometimes appearing similar in location to a previous district, they will not be a continuance of that previous district). Initially, the Mission Areas are likely to take into account and to form around existing



identities. With time and where appropriate, they might move towards different groupings of circuits; or, where justified, an existing configuration might continue (e.g. for missional, ecumenical, or local authority purposes). Whilst the initial number will depend on the new district's final composition, no more than four Mission Areas are likely to be needed.

- 3.4 Each Mission Area will have a Mission Area Lead. They will work collaboratively to foster relationships and to promote mission in their area, through connecting and encouraging others, and by ensuring a focus on mission. Theirs will be a representative role, often deputising for the District Chair (so it will also be a presbyteral role), including connecting to the wider community, ecumenical partners and leaders of other faiths. The role will be part-time (probably 50%), so will sit alongside another presbyteral role (with each case to be separately determined).
- 3.5 Sometimes the subfunctions of the three resourcing hubs will be implemented in a way that supports the circuits within a Mission Area (e.g., providing property, safeguarding or stationing support); at other times, they will operate across Mission Area boundaries by linking and resourcing particular mission initiatives or ministries across the whole district (e.g., pioneering and NPNP, chaplaincy, rural or urban mission). This will offer a 'matrix' approach. It should be more effective than an exclusively geographical, or exclusively issue-based, approach, by ensuring that relationships work at an appropriate scale for certain matters, but also that some specific initiatives or concerns are mutually resourced and brought together more widely.

4. Financial modelling

- 4.1 Initial financial modelling has commenced. Circuit assessments should not increase because of the proposed different way of doing district (although, as would be expected, regardless of these changes, inflationary pressures might of course lead to increases that reflect inflation).
- 4.2 The expectation is to fund the District Hub and Mission Area Leads from the present Connexional contribution: assurance has been given that, for the foreseeable future, the present level of contributions received by the constituent districts for district chairs will be maintained.
- 4.3 Where further costs are necessary because volunteers are no longer available for some essential roles (as in some of the districts already), or because of agreement to provide greater governance or missional resource for circuits, options for district funding or part funding are being explored. With declining numbers, there is recognition that assessment levels can only fund so much; however, sadly with chapel closures and where appropriate consequent sales, collective capital resources are increasing. Therefore, there might be discussion and collective agreement to use some of these growing resources to fund some circuit support resources from the new district.
- 4.4 Where additional finance, human resources or property resources are required by circuits, again there could be district part funding if there is agreement about pooling some of the increased capital funds; alternatively, the district could signpost relevant outsourced resources, with circuits buying in the services that they require.
- 4.5 In summary, the intention is that assessments for the new district should be cost-neutral (subject to inflation), but that, to the degree additional resources to support circuits with governance and mission would be helpful, agreement as to pooling and best use of wider available funds will help to determine the level and nature of the resources that might be provided, to achieve further economies of scale and shared resources, in order further to release or relieve burdens from local churches and circuits.

5. Timeline and further work

- 5.1 The outcomes of the circuit meeting and synod consultations will be reported to the Methodist Council in late April/early May 2023. If there is sufficient collective approval for the proposed amalgamation, the Council is likely to propose the new district to the 2023 Conference. If approved, then 1st September 2024 is the present target date for implementation
- 5.2 In the meantime, the Regional Review Group and associated subgroups will continue to work in preparation for implementation. Some of the priorities are:

2022-3 Connexional Year:

- Agree Mission Areas
- Agree the funding of the new District
- Be ready for the 2023-4 nomination and stationing processes for the roles of District Chair, the Ministry & Vocations Hub Lead/District Secretary (if ordained), and the Mission Area Leads/Deputy District Chairs

2023-4 Connexional Year:

- Consider and apply appropriate transfer processes for the present district lay employees; recruit the Administration and Compliance Hub Lead/District Secretary and (if lay) the Ministry & Vocations Hub Lead/District Secretary
- Move towards a common financial platform
- Ensure that the ordained leadership roles are stationed, shadowing during the year where possible
- Identify and undertake all other significant aspects of transitional planning and preparation for amalgamation

2024-5 Connexional Year:

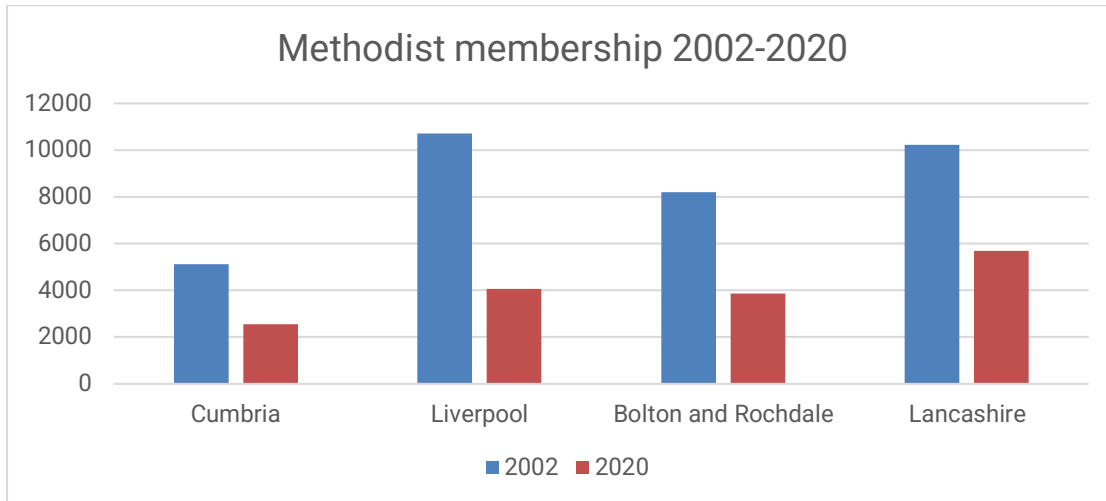
- The new District commences
- Continued implementation of new arrangements
- Ongoing implementation of district purposes

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Background and context

1. The seven North West Districts formed a covenant ten years ago to work closely together. The challenges described in paragraphs 4. and 5. below helped to prompt conversations about further integration. In 2020 a Regional Review Group was appointed by the respective DPCs. This appointed a skills-based group drawn from the region to consider and make recommendations about possible district integration. In 2021, the subgroup proposed a model for a single collaborative district. After consideration, Chester & Stoke (which is also linked to the Wales and West Midlands Region for stationing purposes) and the Isle of Man District (which belongs to a separate jurisdiction) elected not to proceed further and withdrew from the process.
2. The possible model, set out in the paper: *'Imagining a Future for the Methodist Church in our Region'*, was shared with the five remaining districts' DPCs and was offered to the Spring 2022 Synods. Four Task Groups were appointed to develop elements of the proposals, and an updating report with proposals was brought to the September 2022 Synods. Four of the Synods (including Lancashire, following their additional Synod later that Autumn) endorsed the proposals in principle. Accordingly and as resolved by their synods, application was made to the Methodist Council in January 2023 to instigate the necessary process and consultation under Standing Order 401.
3. The Manchester & Stockport Synod in September 2022 chose by majority not to continue the process. It is understood that some (although not all) of the arguments raised in that synod against the proposed district merger were on the basis of expecting further (and possibly more radical) connexional proposals; it was argued therefore that individual regional restructuring should not be pursued in the interim. The Methodist Council has subsequently confirmed that any such connexional proposals are unlikely to emerge or be presented in the foreseeable future. Given this subsequent clarity, and even more so because of the long collegueship with the Manchester & Stockport District (especially with, but not limited to, the close relationship with the Bolton & Rochdale District), the RRG is warmly inviting the Manchester & Stockport District to consider again the proposal, now further developed in this report, and perhaps even to join in the formal consultation, albeit on a timescale that suits them. The RRG very much hopes that this invitation is not received as an imposition or impertinence, but as the deep desire of friends to continue to journey and work together.
4. All circuit meetings and synods will be aware of the decline in membership and the general challenge

to sustain the current structures and operations of local churches, circuits and districts. The four districts have been in existence for many years, but even between just 2002 and 2020 their combined membership declined by over half from 34,252 to 16,173. The breakdown by districts is: Cumbria 5,118 to 2,560; Liverpool 10,718 to 4,052; Bolton & Rochdale 8,191 to 3,856; Lancashire 10,225 to 5,075. This is illustrated in the graph below. As a result, all the districts are experiencing challenges in staffing voluntarily roles (or sometimes providing for paid roles), or staffing the officers and meetings that are essential for districts to operate effectively.



5. If the new District came into being today, its membership would be less than 16,000, arranged in 33 Circuits (each district presently has between 8 and 9 circuits), and with a continuing to age profile. A further reduction in membership and in the number of circuits is anticipated by 2024, and, if current trends continue, thereafter. This negative data is inescapable, and is one driver of the need for radical change. Alongside it is the positive driver outlined in the report above, whereby a new and collaborative way of being district is envisaged, in order better to support and release circuits for mission.

Appendix 2: Proposed District Governance and Hub Functions

A separate document is provided to offer more detail of the proposed new structure and arrangements for resourcing mission and governance, including through collaborative working.

Report dated: 14.2.23