



Uniting the North Kent Circuits

A Consultation

Kent Thameside, Medway, Maidstone, and Sittingbourne and Sheerness Circuits are currently engaged in a process of consultation exploring the possibility of uniting their circuits in order to maximise their combined resources as a means of nurturing growth and mission

A small team from each of the circuits has met over the past nine months to wrestle with the implications of uniting. As part of this process there have been a number of open meetings in each of the circuits to present first thoughts and to elicit feedback from those in attendance at the meetings.

Flesh-on-the-bones

The open meetings have been invaluable in charting through some of the issues involved in bringing four different circuits together. On the 24th March the respective Circuit Meetings discussed proposals to make a commitment to a journey towards uniting the circuits—and for more flesh-on-the-bones proposals for detailed and final consideration to be brought to their respective Circuit Meetings, at a later date.

Tony is the Superintendent Minister of the Sittingbourne and Sheerness Circuit.

Tony Graff reflects on the process

Should the circuit of which I am a part join up with three others to make one larger circuit?

After all, isn't small beautiful? And it could be a bit of a risk, what if it all goes terribly wrong; as well it might?

Despite my hesitations there was a moment when I realised that this was something that personally, and perhaps not for the best of reasons, I found *I wanted*. I became aware that if it didn't happen, I would miss those with whom I had been meeting to talk about this possible future.

Working with a team

I'm not starry-eyed about this. There were times when it felt like we were getting bogged down or taking wrong directions. But I still knew that I had enjoyed the process, I had found some of the benefits of working with a team, something that I had not managed to get in my small circuit.

So, what did I enjoy? Well, the friendship, the support, the laughter. Okay, so you can't guarantee that. People working together have been known to become enemies, to undermine each other, to cause each other to shed tears of rage and frustration. So, it doesn't always work, but where it does, it can be special, so it's worth making it an aim. But it wasn't just meeting together; it was meeting together with a focus. Our work was to consult with the people of our churches about the future. We were able to draw together over this common task.

I also enjoyed the sharing of gifts. There were moments when I knew that there were others who did certain things better than me. In my circuit we had two consultation meetings in a week. After the second, there were those who told me how well that one had gone; there had been a difference; it had been an improvement on the first.

One difference was I had led the first by myself, the second I had shared with another member of the Team. He had brought something extra that by myself I did not have. I was more astonished to discover that I had something to give to the process. There were things that came easily to me, that I thought came naturally to everyone else as well. I realised this was not so and maybe it showed a particular contribution that I could make.

Reckless, confident and faithful

Lastly we were able to encourage one another to be a bit reckless. This is not really a time for playing it safe. In fact, I think being a friend of Jesus has always been to go with him to places where you feel you might end up flat on your face.

Working together with others may give us the confidence to take the risks that are always being asked of the faithful disciple.



How big is too big? How small is too small?

What exactly is Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission all about? There are some folk around the District who think it's simply a ploy by 'them up there' to make bigger circuits.

The reality—surprise, surprise—is something different. Of course there are larger circuits as a result of engaging in the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative. But 'going large'—the equivalent of 'going large' at McDonald's or Burger King, wasn't and isn't the main objective



There are genuine and well-founded reservations from circuits concerned that working or merging with another circuit may, "pull us down", depleting what is already working and precious. However, best practice shared doesn't have to mean best practice halved. It could be that shared insights, skills and experience may well be the catalyst that helps a seemingly struggling or failing circuit to thrive.

Strategic Planning

Regrouping for Mission is not simply about bringing circuits together to make larger circuits. It is about effective mission through strategic planning. Viewed in this way circuits are encouraged to ask:

“ What are we doing? Why are we doing it? Does it need to be changed or improved? If so, how and by when? ”

These are questions that circuits can and do explore within their own circuits, but may also benefit from going a step further by asking if partnering or working with a neighbouring

circuit may strengthen what needs to be done. A fundamental question underpinning the whole 'Regrouping' initiative is to ask in

terms of circuit, not only, *what is too big?* But equally important, *what is too small?*

What God is doing

The key here is mission, defined as *discovering what God is doing and joining in*. Which leads on perhaps to ask, how best do we

join in? Is God calling us to plough a lone-furrow or to work together in a different way? Of course, the lone-furrow and working collectively need not be mutually exclusive, one being right and the other wrong. The key is in doing what God is prompting and inviting us to do.

Which leads to more questions in relation to our mission in circuit. What are we doing, how are we doing it, does it need to change? Can we benefit from working with other circuits? Can we offer support to other circuits? If so, how is that best achieved?

The glory of God

The mission word is not easy and many folk will bring and apply their own understanding to it. Despite the differences and the occasional disagreements as to what it means, perhaps we can agree—that it is always about the glory of God.

WELCOME to the second edition of *Forward Mission*. The first edition was dedicated to John's reflections in response to his conversations with groupings of circuits to discuss *Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission*. This was well received throughout the District and many circuits have actively engaged with the 'suggestions for action'.

This edition is an attempt to give a feel for what is taking place in the District as circuits begin to become involved in the the *Regrouping for Mission* process.

The Kent Thameside Circuit has been preparing for the Thames Gateway Development for over fifteen years.

In that time, several individuals and groups have kept the issue on the agenda and this has been reflected in the change of the Circuit name from the Dartford and Gravesend Circuit to the more aptly named Kent Thameside Circuit. This stated the Circuit's commitment to respond to the huge mission opportunities on its doorstep.

In May 2004, a meeting was held at Bluewater involving ecumenical partners and representatives from the Methodist District and Connexion to try to discern a way forward.

Do something...

The received wisdom was that it was impossible to prejudge what was the 'right' response at any one time, and the only way forward was 'to do something' and trust for the guiding of the Spirit. We agreed that the Methodist Circuit would take the lead but that the work would always be in the name of all church traditions.

On October 28th 2007, a small church plant team was commissioned to go and build a fresh contemporary church within the new Bridge development. Bart Woodhouse (the Circuit's Mission Enabler) and his family moved into a new house on the development in early 2008 and together with The Beacon team have begun to grow a new church on this evolving housing development, situated next to the QEII Bridge.

The Bridge development is the first of the major regeneration schemes planned for the Thames Gateway.

Many of the initial teething problems of setting up a new church plant have been overcome and the Beacon is now looking to the next stage of its development.

The Journey so far

In the summer of 2009 Bart and Tim Crome (the Circuit Superintendent) invited the District to help review the Beacon's journey so far. Through a series of conversations with Graham Hindle (the District Development Enabler), Tim and Bart reflected on a number of questions, for example:

- ❓ *What were your original plans for the Project?*
- ❓ *How did you set about making your vision a reality?*
- ❓ *How did/would you know you had achieved your goals?*

Responses to these questions led to further reflection about structures, leadership, policies and governance, for example:

- ⚠️ *The need to think through governance and structures – even for a small seemingly informal organisation.*
- ⚠️ *The question of identity and authority – to whom does the Project relate and identify; and what is its responsibility to the mother organisation?*
- ⚠️ *Practice and policy – how does the Beacon resolve issues, for example in terms of celebration of Holy Communion, and Baptisms?*

A venturesome expression of Church

The Beacon Project is very much a step in faith and in many ways is a necessary challenge to the way we do church. The challenge facing the Beacon is how it remains faithful to its calling to be a venturesome expression of church whilst at the same time maintaining a sense of good order and practice within the broad bounds of Methodism. The Beacon may be a church without walls, but it cannot exist without structures. What are those structures, and how, and who determines them?

The Beacon Project has recently been adopted under the Connexional *Venture FX* Scheme which will provide continued funding for Bart as one of its first Pioneer Ministers. Thus the Circuit, District and Connexion continue to push the boundaries of establishing a faith community from scratch on a new housing development.

What is God saying?

What is God saying to us through this particular expression of church? What lessons can we learn? How might projects like the Beacon give us new insight into some of the ways we do church?



Disciple All — A Mission for Discipleship

Helping people be and become disciples of Jesus is an essential part of Christian mission. In fact, God has given this calling to all Christians, including to the Methodist Church.

The main task of the Methodist Church locally is discipleship. We can and should respond to the great commission in Matthew 28, to 'disciple all'. However, many local churches find the task daunting. Some Methodist communities need to grow in confidence, not only in how to make disciples but to recognise this as a contribution to bringing about the Kingdom of God.

God's love continues to call all people to follow Jesus, from the youngest to the oldest. The Methodist Church remains part of the way God does this.

God timely moment

This is a 'God timely' moment for change. Our concern for discipleship is shaped by an awareness of the desperate need of the world and its

people, and recognising the role of the Methodist Church in responding to this. This includes the needs of individuals seeking healing, forgiveness, purpose, belonging and abundant life, and fractured and disoriented communities seeking the peace that we believe Jesus Christ brings.

The Methodist Church must share in God's aching longing for the world as expressed in his self-sending in Jesus and, by that same loving grace, understanding that we are invited,

indeed called, to play a part as his disciples.

Being a Christian disciple and knowing Jesus Christ as the wellspring of life means that as Methodists

- ✔️ **We meet and continue to meet God in a life-changing way.**
- ✔️ **We are continually seeking to become the people God intends us to be through discipleship and transformation.**
- ✔️ **We live well with others in ways that help everyone become who God created them to be.**
- ✔️ **We want to bring the world closer into God's Kingdom and lead others towards that through the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, the living water.**

*'Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all people"'.
Matthew 28: 18-19*

We understand all things to have been made by God and are thus made good. We also see the brokenness and subsequent incompleteness of creation - God's creative and saving work bound up in human free will.

Partnership and covenant

God's way is often one of partnership and covenant. The same creative choice to allow humanity the free will to reject is offered to allow humanity to accept and share in the work of healing the whole of creation. In

this we understand creation to involve not only individuals but human society, not only human society but creation itself. All things are worked together for good.

Spirit of mission

It is often said that Methodism has a 'missionary ecclesiology', meaning that discipleship is deep rooted in the *raison d'être* of Methodism. Likewise the understanding of the role and nature of the Holy Spirit is missional, leading to the view that the Spirit is essentially a Spirit of mission, rather than merely a Spirit of blessing to the Church.

Being Methodist has therefore always been about engagement, restoration and transformation, rather than disengagement, withdrawal and separation.

Disciples of Christ engage the world in culturally resonant and counter cultural ways, as obedience to Christ demands. They seek to offer

Christ in word and deed. They live on a large map, as their view of the actions of God – Father, Son and Spirit – impels them.

'Disciple All' is a Connexional Team paper presented to the Methodist Council in February 2010. The full text can be found on the Methodist Church website.

📄 <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/coun-1021-discipleship-190110.pdf>