

Kendal Methodist Circuit – Priorities for Action

Some General Background

All of the mainstream Christian denominations find themselves in a state of flux. Society and culture is changing quickly and our organisations cannot keep up. In the Kendal Methodist Circuit this has often resulted in an approach to planning that is haphazard and reacting to other peoples' agendas in an immediate operational way rather than in a more thoughtful and strategic manner. This has meant that we have not always been able to make the best use of all our resources to further God's work in this place.

We must also recognise that in recent years our resources have shrunk in terms of people, finance, and buildings that are fit for purpose. If we are to reverse this trend and start to plan for success rather than manage decline then we must be organised.

The Kendal Methodist Circuit is a group of nine church communities: Fellside, Stircklandgate, Sandylands, Cowan Bridge, Kirkby Lonsdale, Milnthorpe, Levens, Storth and Arnside. It sits within the wider structure of the Cumbria Methodist District and the national Methodist Connexion. The Circuit is the level at which the resources of staffing and housing are deployed, and has also traditionally been seen as the main unit of mission. The Circuit does not control local churches, but is an expression of the interconnectedness between those churches.

The Circuit is not a group of people separate from local churches, it is representatives from all the churches meeting and working together for the common good. The Circuit works through the Circuit Stewards and Circuit Staff and makes its decisions through the Circuit Meeting.

Rather than create a static Circuit Strategy document, the Circuit Staff and Stewards have worked to produce a set of six Priorities for Action which can be used to inform and shape our decision making over the coming years with regard to how we deploy our resources and how we develop partnerships with others.

The Priorities for Action are broad in nature, and then are developed with some more detail. This detail will inevitably change over time. All of this is a 'work in progress' that will be shaped by the interaction between different churches and the Circuit. It is about a partnership so as to achieve the best possible outcomes with our resources – not a top-down blueprint to be forced upon each and every church community.

Some Specific Background

The Kendal Methodist Circuit has spent time (almost all of 2016) in consultation and conversations between Circuit Stewards, Staff and Churches – looking at its current situation and context and trying to prioritise where its resources might best be used over the next five to ten years so as to achieve a Circuit that can:

- be more pro-active in discerning the work of God that the Methodist people are called to do
- work together in co-operation with one another – valuing our inter-connectedness
- be a positive part of the county ecumenical agenda

and in doing this we would also expect to develop strong, committed Christian communities that have a real sense of discipleship along with a heart for mission.

We have had a number of Circuit Steward & Staff meetings, we have met with every church individually. We have discussed the resulting draft at our Circuit Meeting. There has then been a three month consultation period with submissions invited from individuals, groups and churches – this feedback has been used to inform this latest update to the Priorities for Action.

Priorities for Action 2016 – 2021 and beyond

Our Priorities for Action, Strategic Intent, and Methods of Achievement are now listed below:

Priority 1 – Prayer

Our Strategic Intent is that every church and the circuit values prayer above all else.

We define prayer in the broadest terms as being 'intentionally focused on God'

Version 6 – Updated 13 December 2016

Our Method of Achievement will be to appoint a Prayer Ambassador at Circuit level who offers encouragement and practical support for the development of the prayer life in each church, and across the Circuit. We hope that this will lead to the appointment of a Prayer Champion by every local church.

Our Conversations revealed a great desire to 'do better' in prayer, but also a wide range of experience and initiatives which could be shared across the Circuit. Examples of this are the Circuit prayer meetings, the Praise & Prayer services at Arnside, the prayer chain at Kirkby Lonsdale and Prayer Tree at Sandylands

Priority 2 – Worship and Discipleship

Our Strategic Intent is that

1. Each church community is able to offer a high quality worship experience appropriate for its existing congregation(s) and that either acting alone or in partnership with other churches is able to offer an alternative style of worship experience appropriate to those on the margins of the current church congregation(s).
2. Each member of a church community has ample opportunity to develop their discipleship in a variety of ways

Our Method of Achievement will be:

1. Recruitment and development of more Local Preachers and Worship Leaders
2. Reviewing with each church community their current approach to worship and their ideas for the future
3. Encouraging the development of centres of excellence in different styles of worship across the circuit and/or sections
4. Promoting the idea of local 'Discipleship Groups'* for each church community – and that over time the norm of belonging to a church community includes membership of a Discipleship Group as well as attendance at worship services. (We need, also, to do some educational work about what we mean by discipleship – possibly a series of services/sermons that go round the churches?)
5. Organising a number of discipleship development opportunities at a Circuit level – including study days, retreat days, training days etc.
6. Using Circuit services as an opportunity to enable people to experience different approaches to worship

Our Conversations revealed people were eager to experience different worship styles – possibly by organising visits to other churches; that the presence of Discipleship Groups makes a big difference to a church community. They also revealed that there was a lot of good already going on within the Circuit but it was difficult to see how we act as one body or have a common vision. It also suggested that we should make available different styles of worship for different age groups.

*The idea of Discipleship Groups is that they focus on developing our commitment to following and witnessing to Jesus Christ. Many existing house groups and Bible study groups already do that and will continue unchanged. We have used the title Discipleship Group because it is more intentional. Such groups would include prayer, care for one another, Bible study, and the encouragement necessary for living a Christian life.

Priority 3 – Mission

Our Strategic Intent is our church communities become skilled and confident in reaching out beyond their buildings and existing congregation(s) to share the Good News in a way that is attractive and appealing.

Our Method of Achievement will be:

1. Appointing a Mission Ambassador at Circuit level who offers encouragement and practical support for the development of the mission focus in each church, and across the Circuit. We hope that this will lead to the appointment of a Mission Champion by every local church.

2. Encouraging all the Discipleship Groups to follow at least one short course a year that is focused in some way on mission; and by offering opportunities for people to 'have a go' at mission in a safe and positive environment.

Our Conversations revealed that people have a sense that they should be doing more, but feel that they lack confidence and skills. There is also a desire to pool resources, work more ecumenically and to reach out to groups in our communities.

Priority 4 – Local Preachers and Leaders of Worship

Our Strategic Intent is that our Local Preachers and Worship Leaders are the best skilled and supported that they can possibly be to deliver a range of high quality worship experiences across the circuit and appropriate to differing local contexts.

Our Method of Achievement will be to:

1. Change the structure of the Local Preachers & Worship Leaders meetings to include more training and skills development, and offer more challenge and inspiration
2. Seek expertise from outside of the Circuit and make it available to all Local Preachers and Worship Leaders
3. Create a budget for resources for Local Preachers and Worship Leaders

Our Conversations revealed that Worship Leaders are often little understood by congregations and under-utilised by Local Preachers; there is a perception that the training for Local Preachers is too long/difficult and that is why we don't have more of them. They also revealed the success some Churches have had at bringing people from outside the Circuit to preach.

Priority 5 – Circuit Churches

Our Strategic Intent is that circuit churches are able to:

1. Develop into healthy discipleship communities – with appropriately enabling infrastructure in terms of buildings, finances and office holders – as well as a sense of belonging to a supportive Circuit.
2. Develop the lay leadership in each local church – especially with regard to church stewards taking on much more of a directing and leading role in partnership with the minister.
3. Share and act on the same Priorities for Action as the circuit – but in a way appropriate to their local context.

Our Method of Achievement will be:

1. To ask our Local Preachers to play a role in connecting local congregations to the Circuit by sharing Circuit news at each service they take
2. To change the format of our Circuit Meetings so that they are more inspiring, useful, accessible, and focused on business relevant to churches
3. Support each church to develop its own Priorities for Action. (But how will we actually do this?!)
4. Explore how expertise (for example: finance, property, safeguarding) can be shared across churches so that they can be much more mutually supportive

Our Conversations revealed that people do want to know what is happening around the Circuit, and to be supportive and join in when possible; some smaller churches really struggle with finance, property and safeguarding as these things become more onerous; and that there are difficulties because of ageing congregations and buildings.

Priority 6 – Circuit Organisation and Structure

Our Strategic Intent is that the organisation and structure of the circuit is such that it enables the other priorities to be met by individual churches acting alone; as a part of a Mission Community; and as part of the Circuit.

Our Method of Achievement will be:

1. To encourage local churches to work in sections which make geographical sense in terms of the emerging ecumenical Mission Communities: eg. a Kirkby Lonsdale and Cowan Bridge section; a Kent Estuary section with Levens, Milnthorpe, Storth and Arnside; and a Kendal section of Fellside, Stricklandgate and Sandylands.
2. To re-organise the staff resources in line with this.
3. To review the post of Circuit Administrator (currently vacant) so that it offers not just general administrative support but also work to help the Circuit in achieving its Priorities for Action.

Our Conversations revealed that people want the Circuit to have more of a feel of being a community; that the Circuit meetings need to be more inspiring and relevant – and less boring; that churches sometimes feel a stronger affinity to local, non-Methodist churches than they do to other Circuit churches (although in some places the local churches are actually seen as competitors). There were also a range of views about the necessity or otherwise of having three churches in Kendal.

What's not in the document?

- There isn't much about Pastoral Care – and that's not because it is not important, it's just that it didn't emerge as important from our consultations. Some feedback has been received about how pastoral care might be shared across churches in terms of people who visit care homes and hospitals. There have also been some ideas floated about how the Discipleship Groups can offer pastoral support.
- There isn't much about Ecumenism. This document does focus on priorities in terms of the Methodist Church in this area and also Methodist organisation. But that is not to diminish the increasing amount of ecumenical work that is going on and also the growing number and depth of ecumenical partnerships between our churches and those of other denominations. Re-organising our sections in line with the emerging ecumenical Mission Communities will make this even easier.
- There isn't anything about young people. We acknowledge that this is a big gap, and we need to do some work on it.

Making It Happen

It is vital that our Priorities for Action don't simply become some that we talked about a while ago, or a dusty report on a high up shelf – but that we turn them into a reality.

To enable this to happen we need to make sure that they become part of what we already do. Here are some suggestions:

- Link them to our Circuit Services
- Ask Local Preachers to lead services about prayer, discipleship and mission
- Regular Circuit prayer meetings
- Make 'Progress on the Priorities for Action' a standing item on the Circuit Leadership Team's agenda
- Review one of each of the areas in depth at each Circuit Meeting
- Review all the Priorities for Action annually as a Circuit
- Put the 'Priorities for Action' on the agenda of each local church council meeting, and encourage the local minister and the circuit steward link person to share ideas and good practice from the other churches that they are linked with.

Some Feedback

A number of churches and individuals have given feedback regarding the fourth version of the Priorities for Action. Most of this has been able to be incorporated into this sixth version. Whilst much of the feedback was positive, some was (very) negative.

Some important points made were:

- It is vital that the Priorities for Action are not seen as something to be imposed on churches in a top down manner.
- There is a concern for how we will support the prayer and mission ambassadors / champions.
- There was a very mixed response to the idea of Local Preachers having a role in sharing circuit news with local churches – so this needs some further exploration and thought. Alongside this is the need to clarify the role that Circuit Stewards play on local Church Councils.