

# Casting the net on the other side <sup>i</sup>

A Journey<sup>ii</sup>  
with the Methodist Church Sheffield



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## Introduction

*‘What’s this? Another ‘initiative’?*

*We’re suffering from initiative overload! We’re struggling with simply keeping the lights on, fulfilling the statutory roles, holding it all together! Do we really have to plough through yet another visionary document?’*

Friends, we hear you!

This booklet is written as a response to our current situation as a Circuit. It is written in response to the many and repeated voices across our circuit which articulate three core things:

- *The circuit is too big, and we have lost our connection to and relationship with each other*
- *We can’t focus on the central call to work out our discipleship and to participate in the mission of Christ, because we are burdened by the administrative demands needed to maintain our buildings and our societies*
- *We long to be set free to have space to respond to the call of the Spirit, so that, through ministry and mission, we might fulfil the unique thing to which we have been called at this time and in this place*

What follows seeks to address these core issues and to create enough of a map for us to start out together on a new journey. It challenges us to be brave, to be gracious and to be generous. And for what we cannot yet know or see, to simply trust God for the rest.

We invite you to create some space to work through this booklet, taking time to pray and think about each section.

We also encourage you to talk to others in your church about what is proposed and to gather thoughts together at your church council, before making response as you wish.

If we are to embark on the journey, we will need to commit to following both maps and dreams.

We will need to listen for and answer the call of Jesus to *‘cast the net on the other side...’*

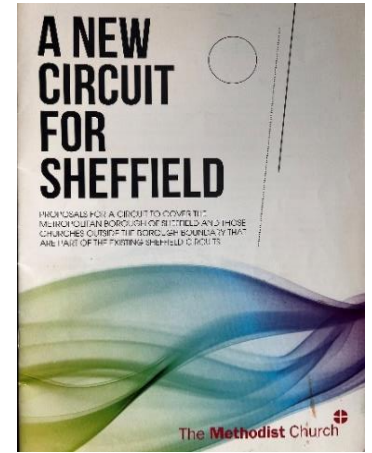
**God who sets us on a journey  
to discover, dream and grow,  
lead us as you led your  
people  
in the desert long ago;  
journey inward, journey  
outward,  
stir the spirit, stretch the mind,  
love for God and self and  
neighbour  
marks the way that Christ  
defined.**

## To begin ... some important facts and figures

The Sheffield Circuit was formed in September 2013 by drawing together 8 former circuits from across the city.

The Circuit is large and diverse and consists of 50 churches including 9 Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) across the city and stretching into the more rural areas of South Yorkshire and parts of North-East Derbyshire.

The membership is 2,297, which includes 597 LEP members (October 2022).



Current Staffing comprises 12 Full-time Presbyters, 2 Part-time (75% and 35%) Presbyters, 2 Deacons, 1 Local Lay Pastor, 1 Youth Co-ordinator, 1 Children's & Families Co-ordinator, 2 Community-based Pioneer Lay Workers, 4 Part-time Administrative Staff and 1 Development Worker. Staffing is the major expense in our current budget.

- We ran a budget deficit of £160K for 2022/23. This is of great concern.
- We are fortunate in having several active supernumeraries.
- We also have 3 presbyters stationed in the Circuit who serve in appointments beyond the Circuit.
- The Circuit is in a covenanted agreement with the Sheffield Diocese.
- The Circuit relates well with the local authorities, ecumenical and other faith traditions.
- Set in a "City of Sanctuary", the Circuit serves and is served by diverse cultures.

## Leadership

The initial superintendency model was a shared responsibility with 4 Co-superintendents. The personnel in this team changed over time, and the number of co-superintendents fluctuated between 2 and 4. The Circuit Leadership Team (CLT) recently requested an independent review of the superintendency structure. The

recommendation of the Review Team was that a move to a single Superintendent would be most beneficial to the Circuit at this time.

Historically the CLT consisted of all circuit stewards and representatives of the ministerial staff. Now *all* ministerial staff and circuit stewards meet once a month, and the ministerial staff also meets for support and prayer on a monthly basis.

The presbyters each oversee several churches (ranging from 1 presbyter with six churches to 1 presbyter with two churches).

**Exploration brings new insights,  
changes, choices we must face;  
give us wisdom in deciding,  
mindful always of your grace;  
should we stumble, lose our  
bearings,  
find it hard to know what's right,  
we regain our true direction  
focused on the Jesus light.**

## Some other facts:

- *A vast majority of our members are over 60. Only a small percentage of our members are 40 or under. With this age demographic in mind, project ahead 10 years... The impacts are already felt in the lack of people able to take on roles within the churches & the circuit.*
- *Across the circuit, many people are working incredibly hard to simply keep their churches going.*
- *We have many properties, but dwindling membership figures and finances.*
- *Property issues cannot be considered in isolation, as they impact hugely on all areas of church life & mission. Spending large amounts of money on old buildings which are no longer fit for purpose is no longer an option.*

## Read John 21: 1-6

*After this, Jesus appeared again to the disciples, this time at the Sea of Galilee.*

*This is how he did it: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the brothers Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.*

*Simon Peter announced, "I'm going fishing." The rest of them replied, "We're going with you."*

*They went out and got in the boat.*

*They caught nothing that night.*

*When the sun came up, Jesus was standing on the beach, but they didn't recognize him.*

*Jesus spoke to them:*

*"Good morning! Did you catch anything for breakfast?"*

*They answered, "No."*

*He said, "Throw the net off the right side of the boat and see what happens."*

*They did what he said.*

*All of a sudden there were so many fish in it, they weren't strong enough to pull it in.*



## A challenge

Dear friends, we can't go back to doing what we have always done, which is what Jesus' disciples tried to do when they returned to fishing.

The risen Jesus (who they did not recognise at first) came along and told the disciples to throw their net out on the other side. This made no sense! *Yet they did it.* It was an act of faith, a huge risk, a step into the unknown. And the consequences were beyond their wildest dreams.

Then they knew it was Jesus.

The risen Jesus calls to us now: "throw your net out on the other side." Step into the unknown! We do not know where he will lead us, but we do know that if we trust the one who calls, the consequences will be beyond what we can dream.

## Looking forward

At the heart of the Christian faith and our Methodist membership, is the call to worship, individually and collectively. From this beating heart flows a life of service, learning, and sharing. Over the past few years, particularly during the Covid Pandemic, many of us have been challenged to reimagine what it means to be church, discovering new dynamics to our personal relationship with God and the way we live out our faith together and apart.



As our membership ticket reminds us, the calling of the Methodist Church is to...

*'...respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission'.*

Mission conjures up all sorts of pictures in our minds and finds many means of expression throughout our Circuit, but at its core is the desire to share the personal relationship we have with God through Jesus with others.

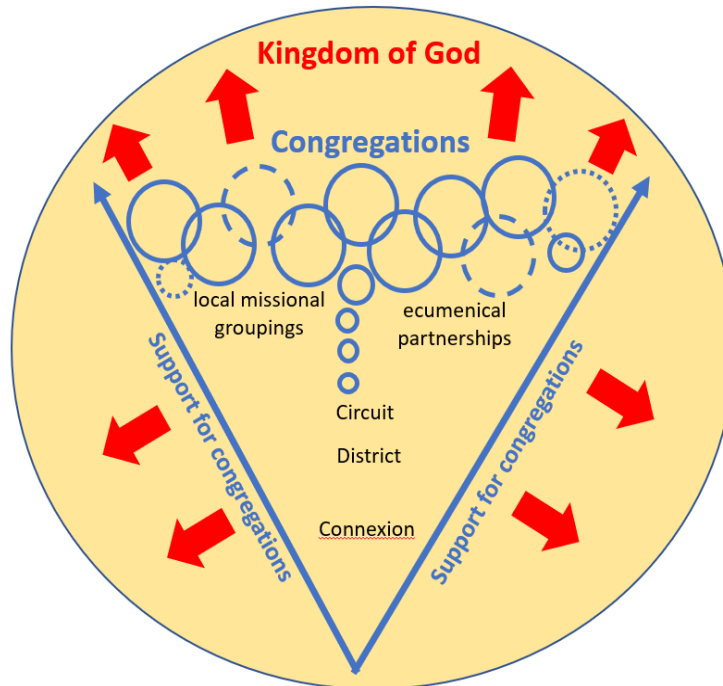
A sense that here is a relationship that is not just for me.

A sense that this relationship with God affects the way I work, play, learn, speak, listen; and this naturally shines out to others through all I do.

## Rebalancing the Circuit

### Our congregations are the front line of ministry and mission

Each congregation is called to understand and interact with its local neighbourhood, to work towards flourishing relationships in community and to join in with the work of the Holy Spirit wherever she may be found to be.



### The Circuit exists to facilitate the life and work of the congregations

- to nurture and support the churches as they engage in ministry and mission.



Over the last seven months, members of the Circuit Leadership Team (CLT) reflected and prayed together. We listened carefully to each other and to God and identified the need to urgently reassess the **governance and processes** of the circuit, the infrastructure – **to ensure the best resourcing of congregations for ministry and mission.**

In doing so we would be mindful of the following:

- The need to ‘mend the net’ – getting our house in order, so that we can wholeheartedly engage with the task of casting the net on the other side.
- To recognise that many local leaders are tired, and the work of “keeping buildings going” prevents the all-important focus on the mission from happening.
- To reduce the burden of tasks that don’t match our ministers' natural skill sets to enable them to flourish.
- To own the fact that we cannot financially sustain the current model of staffing and ministry.

## A mission-focused Circuit

If our primary aim is to be churches focused on mission (in all its various out-workings), then all the resources we have - people, buildings, finances, structure and administration - need to be developed and utilised in such a way that they are liberating and outward facing.

And key to this is the need to creatively update our current governance structures to enable effective mission across the circuit

- We need to look realistically at the church communities that meet within existing buildings and locations.
- We need to explore ways in which the Circuit can reach out to new people and new places.

**End our longing for the old days,  
grant the vision that we lack,  
once we've started on this  
journey  
there can be no turning back;  
let us travel light, discarding  
excess baggage from our past,  
cherish only what's essential,  
choosing treasure that will last.**

## How might we begin to do this?

Firstly, let's all pay attention again to the following:

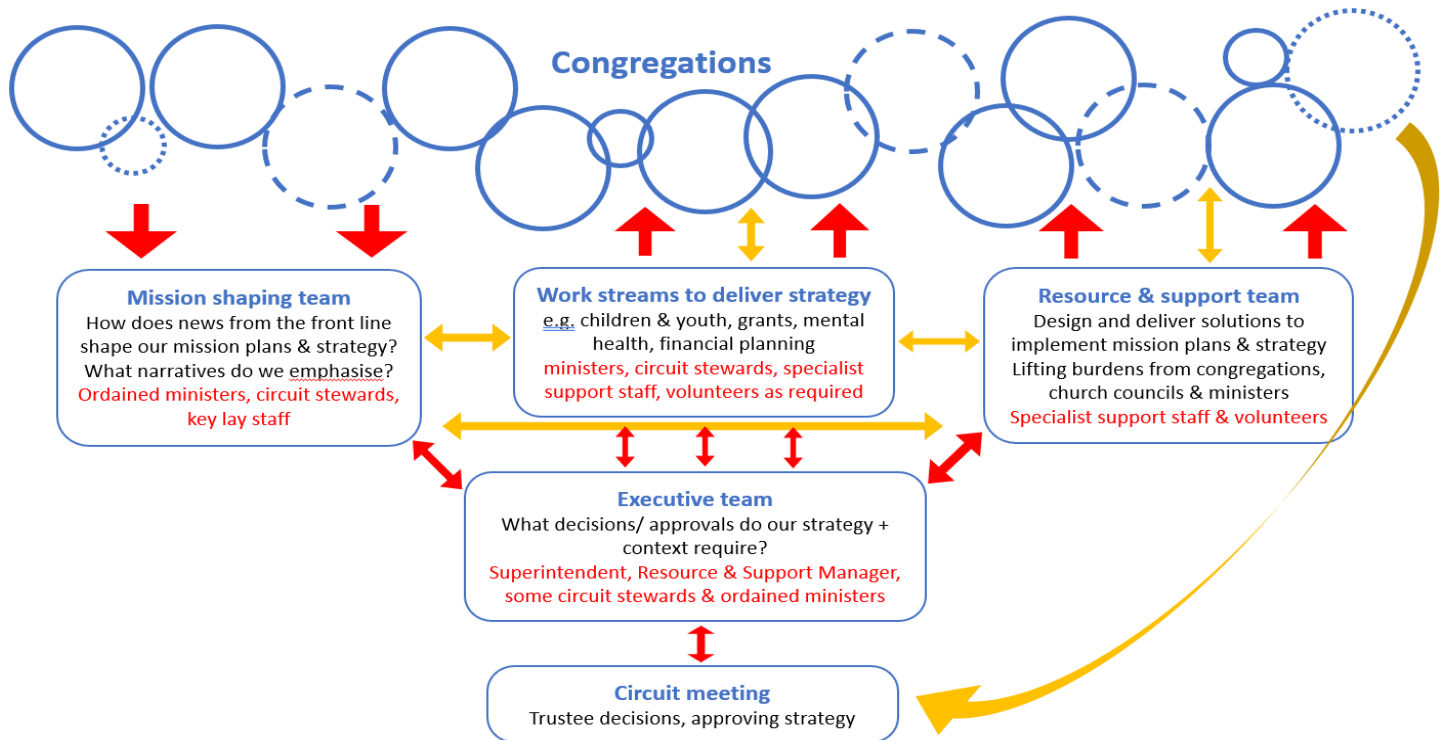
1. Understanding and expressing who we are: a Circuit with the city at its centre, including inner-city, urban, suburban and rural areas.
2. Valuing all people as made in the image of God, celebrating the diverse gifts we bring and encouraging the ministry of the whole people of God in the mission of God within the Circuit.
3. Supporting the mission priorities of the Circuit in the form of people, property and finance as appropriate, enabling local churches to live out God's mission in relevant ways within different communities and in line with:
  - The "Our Calling" priorities of the Methodist Church (Worship, Learning & Caring, Service, Evangelism)
  - The Methodist Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity.
  - The God for All Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth. (Committing ourselves to be a church that is growing, evangelistic, inclusive and justice-seeking).
4. Acting justly towards all people as made in God's image, towards God's creation and in the sharing of resources in line with the agreed mission priorities of the Circuit.
5. Reaching out beyond our church communities and buildings.
6. Committing to prayerfully holding before God each step along the way and discerning the guidance of the Spirit as new possibilities continue to emerge.



## Re-prioritising

Following the last CLT Away Day, Neil Harland, our District Mission Enabler, pictured our conversations in the diagram below. (It's helpful to read from the bottom up!)

**Note that each team is in its place to ensure support for the front line: the ministry and mission bubbling up in the local churches.**



## Re-distribution

The Sheffield circuit is one of the biggest in the Connexion. One of the primary motivators for bringing the 8 circuits into one was to help us to share resources to enable ministry in those areas that do not necessarily have the resources to sustain ministry themselves.

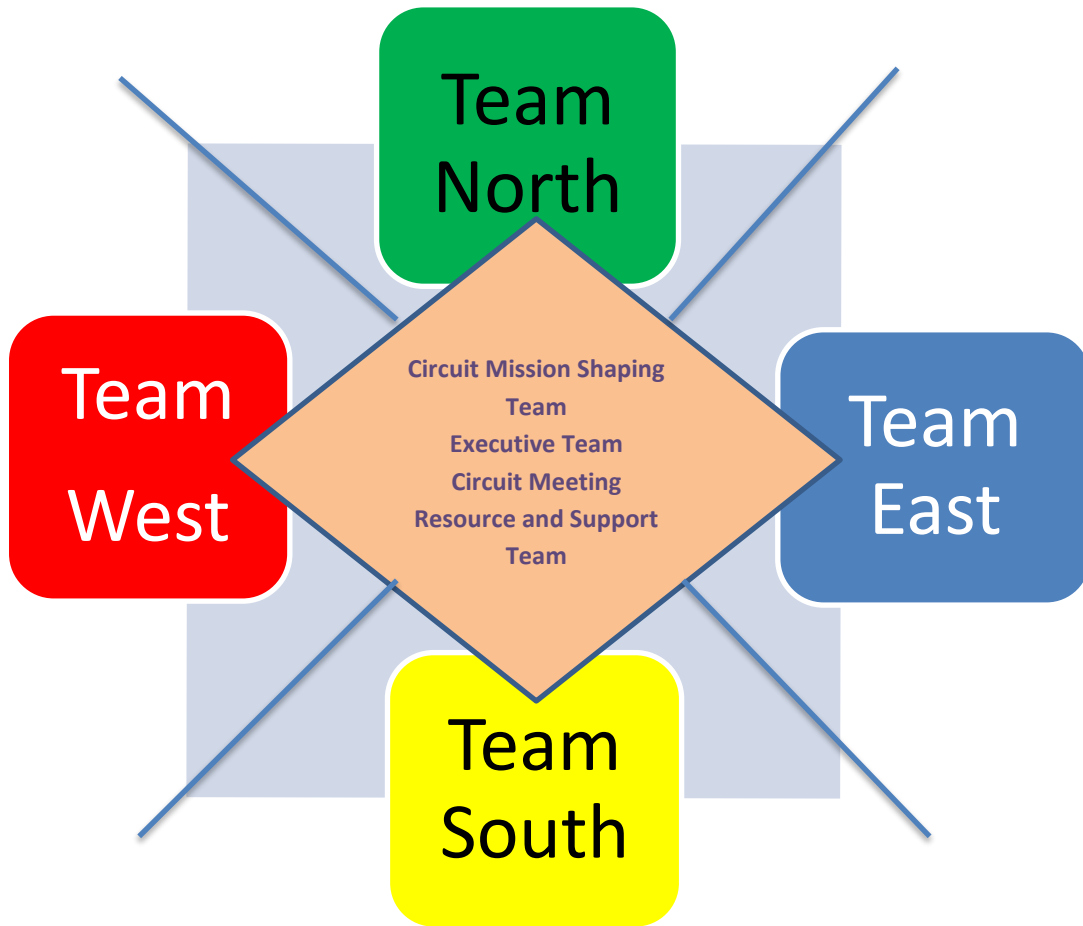
**“I imagine the day when those who have lots of resources will begin to see themselves as partners in mission with those in parts of Sheffield where mission cannot be resourced – and that we will learn from and lean on each other for the sake of God’s kin-dom”**  
(Rev’d Romeo Pedro).

But we often feel disconnected from each other and unmotivated to support each other’s ministry and mission. And this needs to change.

## So, what do we propose will be different?

To address issues around the sharing of resources, the CLT wishes to suggest that we form **4 smaller clusters** (of roughly 12 congregations) where conversations can be facilitated about connections, sharing, and the more effective use of buildings, finances and human resources in those teams.

What might these clusters look like?



And within each cluster...



## Clusters of congregations

### Why?

Working more closely together will:

- allow us to share resources and expertise
- give us improved communication
- give us greater recognition of the understanding that we are a Circuit
- provide mutual encouragement, friendship and support for young people as well as adults across the Circuit
- reduce the load on people and the resources being spent on building management
- enable us to put more of our energy and time into our ministry and mission

### What are the challenges?

This will require a change of culture in the heart of our congregations to be more outward-looking, not just in “survival mode”. It will inevitably bring change. We will:

- have to make some tough decisions about buildings for which we have an emotional attachment
- need to work hard on giving pastoral support to all
- have to consider ways of integrating different people into our fellowships or creating new church fellowships to embrace a wide mix of people formerly attending other church locations

### What?

Encourage key members from each congregation to meet with members from at least one other congregation. The purpose would be to share stories, explore ways the congregations could help each other, and commit to praying for each other. An essential part of being a circuit is acting as an extended family of congregations. Use hospitality and eating together to facilitate excellent conversations. Share stories of positive things which flow from these.



**How do you think working in smaller clusters can help us address our challenges?**

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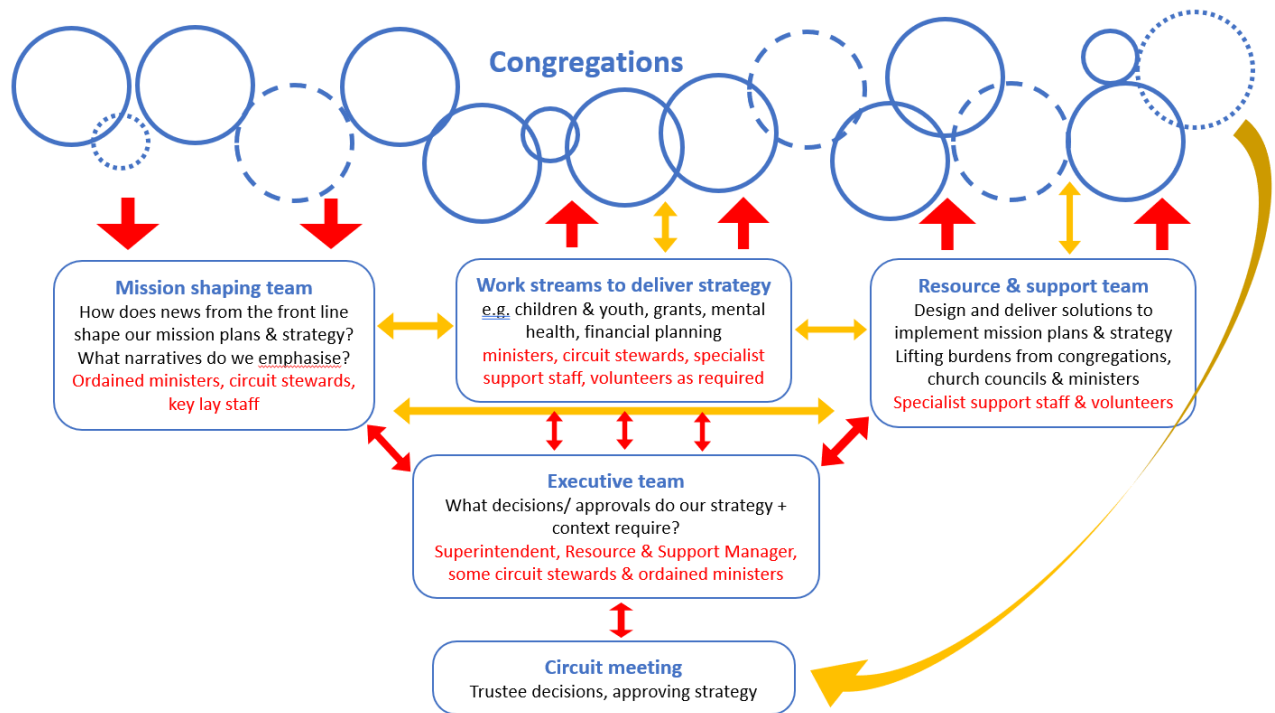
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**How many congregations do we need in this geographical area? What are the natural connections between our churches?**

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## How would this change the current structures of the Circuit?



## The Circuit Meeting

The Circuit Meeting would continue to hold its current responsibilities. However, as strategy, policy and finance are developed and approved over time, the Circuit meeting would increasingly delegate authority to the **Executive Team** within clearly defined parameters, to enable routine decisions to be taken when necessary, reducing the number of decisions to be voted on: e.g. recruitment of new staff roles consistent with a clearly defined staffing strategy. This creates a model for more flexible, time sensitive and nimble ways of working.

## Deeper Engagement across the Clusters

### What?

Church-elected circuit meeting members (and any other interested members) would gather with their ministers to discuss agenda items in local informal teams prior to circuit meetings, also enabling relationship building through the sharing of news and ideas between congregations. The core purpose is to be part of a collective discernment process and not a creation of localised voting blocks.

Circuit meetings could be extended to allow time for presentations, small group discussion, prayer and food prior to voting. This would probably necessitate a Saturday or Sunday.

Circuit meeting papers would be distributed early to give time for people to read them (including in advance of cluster meetings). Following meetings, a summary of key decisions and why they matter would be promptly and widely distributed.

## Why?

To enable and empower local congregations. Engaging across the clusters seeks to ensure Circuit trusteeship responsibilities are conducted in ways which help people to better understand decisions to be made, relate to missional priorities, and have opportunity to discern how to respond in conversation with people from other congregations. Channels of communication will open, reassuring congregations of proactive support for their mission.

**Who?** Existing circuit meeting members. (Note: reducing the number of church councils, for by example having multisite churches, would reduce the size of the circuit meeting. Wholesale merging of church councils would be a major change process in itself, and several factors would need to be considered)

## Cost?

Local team meetings would likely need to be led by ordained ministers, circuit stewards or other members of circuit leadership – creating an extra time burden. There may be some overlap with cross congregational networking, but networking would ideally involve a broader spread of people than circuit meeting members

## When?

Provided papers could be circulated early enough, Cluster meetings could be immediately trialled in part of the circuit before being rolled out more widely.

## Who discerns Circuit Strategy?

### The Circuit Mission Shaping Team

Informed by news from the front line, our local congregations, and focused on helping them reset for proactive mission, The Circuit Mission Shaping Team would be the primary forum for discerning strategies, priorities and narratives to be shared. It would therefore need a broad base of wisdom and expertise. Its membership would likely be similar to the present Circuit Leadership Team. **Strategies needing to be developed and adopted as a matter of urgency include:**

- Staffing model – including ordained ministers, lay pastors, support & resource staff and realistic expectations as to their capacity and responsibilities
- Multi-year plan for stabilising the circuit finances
- Co-ordinated support for mission priorities where congregations lack confidence, e.g. evangelism
- Models for resourcing and nurturing fruitful but fragile or new work
- Property – what buildings are needed, for what missional uses, and how are these best developed
- Simplifying managing trustee responsibilities/ reducing the number of church councils.

**The Executive Team** would make practical decisions within the framework set by the Mission Shaping Team and in response to changing contexts, such as recruitment approval consistent with the strategy. It would commission pieces of work and be the group to which other teams are accountable. In some senses, the governance and business elements of work currently undertaken by CLT.

The Executive Team would need to be small enough to be able to function nimbly whilst holding the trust of all other teams. The clearer strategies and priorities from the Mission Shaping Team can be, the more straightforward this alignment and inclusion becomes.

**Communications Team** - setting a common storytelling narrative

### **Why?**

To help congregations tell their story and the wider story, flowing from a coherent common mission. To help the sharing of resources between congregations. To foster hope through testimony of how God's story is active across Sheffield. To model noticing God's story meeting our stories, so that members will do and speak of this in and beyond their congregations.

### **What?**

A Circuit wide narrative, linked to Methodist priorities, which is used in a co-ordinated way across multiple media channels. High impact, easy to understand and access, clear communication.

### **Who?**

A communications team will need to be created to oversee this. Their key tasks will be sourcing stories and producing resources.

### **Resource & Support Team**

A new team providing specialist support to implement mission plans and strategy, enabling ministers (ordained and lay) and congregations to flourish by lifting burdensome responsibilities and tasks from them.

It would consist of technical administration in fields such as communications, safeguarding, data management, property management. The scale of this team could be built up over time. Whilst this may generate some new costs for the circuit, it may also offer opportunities for generating new income, e.g. through grants and property management.

Employment legislation and good practice will need to be followed if existing roles are reconfigured as a part of this broader team.

A Resource & Support Manager could be appointed to oversee this team, which would release the superintendent for other elements of strategic and representative leadership.

The Resource & Support Team would need to work in close partnership with other circuit teams and workstreams, with choices about prioritization of effort agreed with the Executive Team.

## Other work streams

Inevitably there will be a need for some fixed term and ongoing work streams, required to deliver for the circuit. There may be scope for rationalizing those already existing. Eg: once a grants budget is set, it could be managed by a single grants team rather than requiring discussion at both MVT and Finance Committee.

**All these teams would need ways of appropriately building Holy Habits/other articulations of Circuit values into their ways of working, modelling what we wish to encourage in our congregations.**

## How do we ensure that we do not lose our joint circuit vision?

### Regular Whole Circuit Celebrations

#### Why?

To understand and celebrate that each local congregation is part of a greater whole - being local contextual expressions of a larger movement. To broaden horizons beyond existing buildings being the only spaces in which we can worship. To offer inspirational teaching and worship, utilizing expertise within the circuit.

#### What?

A periodic gathering for quality worship, storytelling, food, and relationship building. A Sunday morning, when most regular worshippers are available, giving the greatest chance of the majority of members attending and preventing diary overload!

#### Who?

To engage as many members as possible. Promoted by all ministers to avoid churches opting out. Managed by a small planning team.

#### Cost?

In some places not having the church doors open on a Sunday morning could be seen as risking not being available to new people, although in practice personal invitations are usually more significant.

Possible that an external venue may need to be hired, but in the winter we would be saving not heating 50 buildings. Cost of catering could be significant.

For some people cost of travel or lack of public transport could be a challenge and so support may be required.

#### When?

Allow time to plan well – possibly autumn 2023, which will be 10 years since the original launch event at the University of Sheffield. Seek feedback after initial event.

**How do you feel about these whole circuit celebrations? How would they help (or not) to resource us for mission?**



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### **When should these changes happen?**

The new structure should be agreed upon and in place by **June 2024**. Where staffing changes are envisaged for this structure, they could then be made incrementally within the context of the smoother decision-making it offers.

### **What happens next?**

This is where you come in! Every church council will be asked to discuss these proposals supported, if need be, by the current CLT. We will be very proactive in ensuring that the communication methods used do not exclude anyone from offering their views.

Your response to this booklet will be gathered, with feedback from others, between June and November 2023.

Feedback from all churches will be reviewed and presented to the Circuit meeting in March 2024 where the next steps will be explored.

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet and praying for the future of the Sheffield Methodist Circuit.

**When we set up camp and settle  
to avoid love's risk and pain,  
you disturb complacent comfort,  
pull the tent pegs up again;  
keep us travelling in the  
knowledge  
you are always at our side;  
give us courage for the journey,  
Christ our goal and Christ our  
guide.**



**Considering our current context,  
the Circuit must change.  
We'd like to hear from each church, and these  
questions might help you in your thinking.  
Thank you.**



**Response Form (Please use additional sheets if necessary)**

**What is your response to the ideas outlined here?**

**How well do these ideas address the issues raised by our context?**

**How will these ideas help us to do mission better?**

**What changes would you suggest to improve what is suggested here?**

**What suggestions do you have about other ways forward for the Circuit?**

Church.....

Your Name (optional).....

Please feel free to contact any of the ministers if you would like to talk about the issues raised in this booklet.

<sup>i</sup> Bible quotation: The Message (MSG) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

<sup>ii</sup> Words for “God who sets us on a journey”: by Joy Dine (1937 – 2001) © Revd Mervyn Dine. Reproduced with permission, available for reproduction for the purposes of worship.

Most of what is in this discussion document comes from CLT consultations contained in 2 recent documents (The Lucraft and Harland reports).