

# Imagining a Future for the Methodist Church in our Region

## Brief Overview

The District Policy Committees are invited to consider a possible way forward for the districts in the North West and Mann region, by amalgamating the majority of the Districts into a single District. This would be a radical approach designed to strip out some layers of administration and oversight and to pool the ability to resource more effectively the mission of circuits and churches.

The new regional District's support might be organised into three hubs, led collaboratively by a single District Chair and two District Secretaries, focusing on Mission & Leadership, Vocations & Ministry, and Administration and Compliance for our People, Property and Financial resources. Connectedness between groups of circuits and their churches should continue to be nurtured and might be enabled by (re)configuring them into Mission groups or areas within the regional District, each with a Deputy District Chair to convene and coordinate them.

This paper seeks to make the case for change, but with important principles identified for what might inform this and some of the next steps required, but with an openness to the present districts shaping what might come into being.

If the proposal gains support to enable further work to be carried out, there are external factors (the timetables for various District or Interim Chair appointments, relevant Standing Order procedures (especially 401), and in particular the desire to ease some burdens and to reshape for mission sooner rather than later) that suggest the following timetable:

March 2022	Consideration at DPCs to confirm whether to develop the model
April 2022	Sharing the outline proposal with Synods <i>Work by task groups after DPCs and Synods to develop details</i>
Sept 2022	Consultation at Synods <i>Work by task groups(s) to amend details</i>
Nov-Dec 2022	DPCs 'sign off' a developed version for the Methodist Council
Jan 2023	Methodist Council considers and launches a formal consultation:
Feb/Mar 2023	- with Circuit Meetings
April 2023	- with Synods
May 2023	Report to Methodist Council (with extraordinary meeting if required)
June 2023	Consideration and decision by the Conference
June 2024	(Further consideration by the Conference if disagreements in 2023)
1 <sup>st</sup> Sept 2024	If approved, new regional District begins

## Introduction



Following a process of review, we would like to invite the District Policy Committees of our region to look imaginatively into the future of the Methodist church in our region. This paper has emerged from the thinking of a representative group from the seven Districts in the North West & Mann Region plus a smaller working group involving others with appropriate skills, supported by members of the Connexional Team. In this paper, first, we will make a case for why change needs to happen. Second, we will look at the principles which we would propose should govern our imaginative planning. Third, we will offer one potential model for consideration. Fourth, if the model were to be broadly endorsed, we identify some further necessary work.

Our hope is to invite a wider group of people who have some understanding of how the Methodist church works, to engage in a process of collaborative reflection, so we can plan together, make good decisions, and lay foundations for future good practice. Some of this will need to take place in particular task groups.

Within this consideration we were very aware of the particular situation of the Isle of Man District, which is part of our covenanted group of Districts, but which is in a separate country not part of the U.K. with its own legislature. We would want to offer an open invitation to the Isle of Man District to consider this future with us, and decide the extent to which it could see itself as belonging within, or separate from a North-West of England District.

Chester & Stoke-on-Trent District have chosen not to be a further part of this process. They have a different perspective, situated as they are on the boundary between the North West and the West Midlands regions. There may be further discussions with them about individual circuits along the boundary.

## Section 1: Why should we imagine a future?

The future belongs to God, and we are a people who belong to God. That is reason to both pay attention to it, and to not worry about it. As we seek to pay attention to the future, we recognise that these are challenging times: the pace of social change and the numerical decline of the Methodist Church frame our situation. However, we do not believe that decline should determine our situation. Circuits are working hard for growth, and believe that we are in tune with a movement of the Spirit which continues to open up possibilities for witness and service.

Before we look into the future we therefore note these things, which provide some reasons for imagining a different future:

- Our Districts have a history of co-working and covenant which has strengthened and enriched each partner.
- The Methodist Church is dramatically smaller than when the present Districts were first conceived, and given the demographic of our membership, is likely to become smaller still in the coming ten years.
- The governance burden of current structures is disproportionate to our membership. Districts have been struggling to fill lay appointments, and meetings are replicated across the region.
- There is an increasing expectation of compliance with a variety of laws and regulations, which smaller units struggle with.
- The wider Oversight and Trusteeship work of the Methodist Church expects us to engage in some kind of process, recognising that a reconfiguration and reduction in the numbers of districts will assist in reducing the connexional assessment, and the size of Conference.

There is also a set of questions which provide another reason for looking imaginatively into the future. We want our structures to be shaped around our circuits, their churches, and their staff, ordained and lay. Together these form the principal context for the Methodist Church to respond to *Our Calling*. We need to identify and respond to their needs as they change over time. So we might ask:

- How can we provide consistent leadership over a period of time, despite changes in the size of our church and the ongoing pace of social change?
- How can we provide a balance between a larger unit which gives benefits of scale and a bigger vision, alongside the more local where relationships can be stronger?
- How can we release Circuits from administration, for mission?

The importance of these questions provides another reason to look imaginatively into the future.



## Section 2: What principles might we pay attention to?

### A. Theological

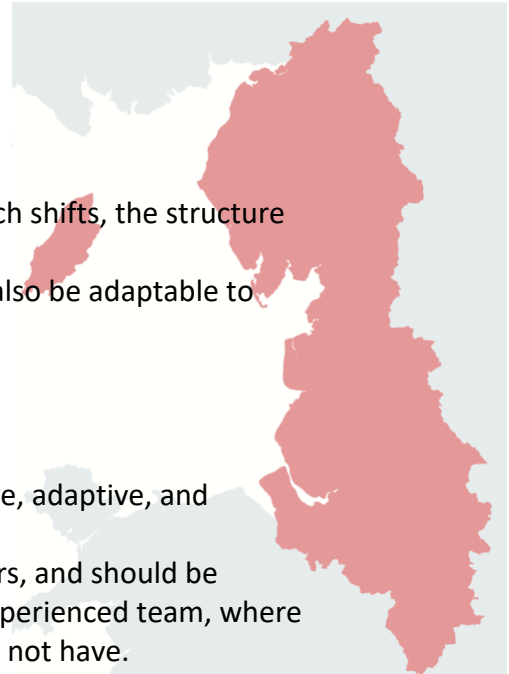
1. Biblical: in that the witness of the Bible provides us with a tool for making meaning.
2. Just: by seeking to embed practices which are inclusive (in that we believe the Gospel of Christ is good news for everyone, and that everyone has a place at the table) and Magnificat-shaped (in that we will recognise the need for the powerful to be brought down from their thrones, and the lowly to be lifted up).
3. Oriented to God's time: in that past, present, and future are each viewed in the perspective of God's purposes, while changing human perspectives and seasons are all challenged as relative and limited. Social change is therefore the context of what we do, without becoming a defining principle.
4. Vocational and Missional: The aim of our imagining should be to structure the work of the region in such a way as to support *Our Calling*:  
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.
5. Circuit and local churches are identified as the principal place where this response is made.
6. Circuits are identified as the primary locus of mission, and local churches as the primary locus of worship, care and fellowship.

### B. Governance

1. The role of a District includes:
  - a. Advancing the mission of the Church in a region;
  - b. Providing a foundation to support circuits in ministry and mission, and in governance and compliance.
  - c. Providing a focus for collegial oversight and mutual accountability.
2. The structure should seek to allow decision-making authority to be held at the most local level appropriate (subsidiarity). The appropriate local level maybe that of the local church; the circuit; or the mission area, for example where there is a county or ecumenical context through which mission and decision making also occur. All this should allow decision-making to be accountable on a bigger map.
3. Collegial oversight and mutual accountability should apply at all levels. At the regional level, this would be partly expressed through a single group of District Trustees (the District Policy Committee).

### C. Social context

1. The pace of current social change and the numerical decline of the Methodist Church frame our situation.
2. Our structures need to be flexible and able to serve the needs of the church in different ways depending on changing needs. Because of this our structure will need to be subject to repeated reflection (i.e. there should be an iterative way of



working), so that as social context and the shape of the church shifts, the structure also shifts.

3. The structure should be fitting for a smaller church, but will also be adaptable to areas of growth which are yet to be experienced.

#### D. Leadership

1. The leadership of the Regional District should be collaborative, adaptive, and attentive.
2. A District Chair should be one leadership role alongside others, and should be supported by and collaborating with a well-resourced and experienced team, where others bring skills and experience that the District Chair does not have.
3. Leadership should be structured in such a way that it will be open to participation by lay people, deacons and presbyters.

### Section 3: Imagine a Regional District?

Imagine we had a single regional District, with a single District Chair. That might be too big a responsibility for one person to carry, and we prefer ways of leadership which are shared, mutual and collaborative. So that person will need others alongside them.

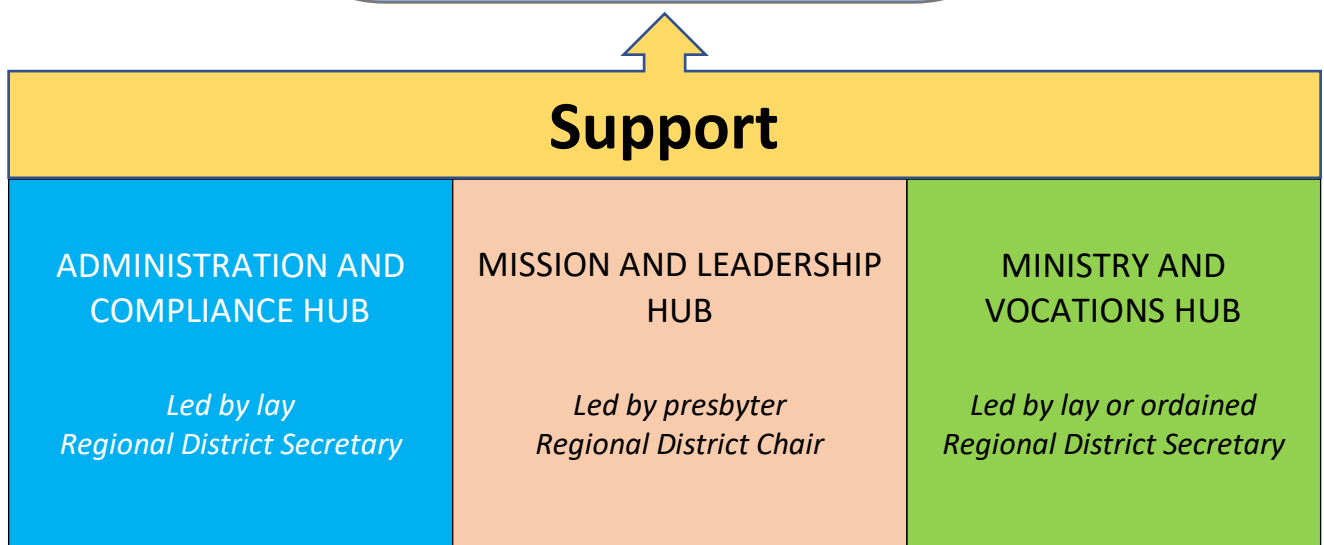
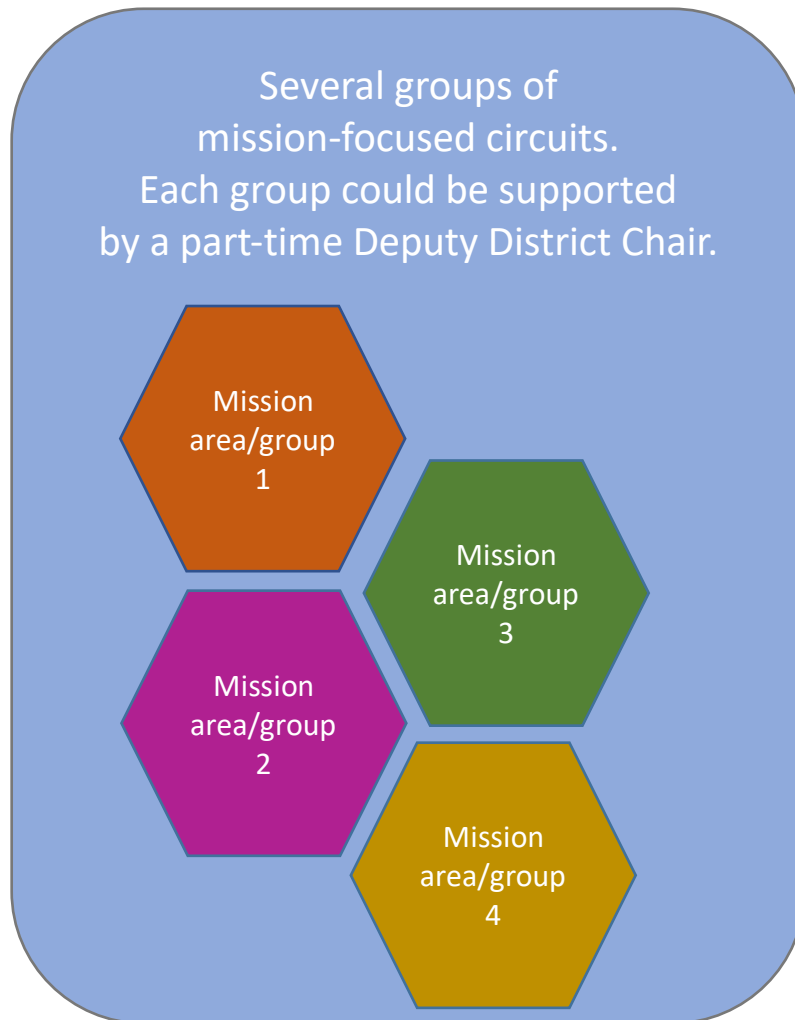
Let's imagine that they have collegiality in two ways:

1. First through four or five deputy chairs spread around the region. These would be presbyters who provide an immediate relationship with an area consisting of a group of circuits and their ministers and lay leaders. (Whilst we have wondered about whether such roles could be fulfilled by deacons or lay persons, the role, including at times representing the District Chair in that area, involves characteristics and functions of the presbyteral role; but deputy chairs would still be expected to work collaboratively with lay and ordained colleagues alike.) In our imagining we might already be concerned that a geographically large district might be too big for meaningful relationships, so such a group of people would also help to address that concern.
2. Second through a team of lay and ordained leaders, who take responsibility for particular responsibilities across the District, designed to support the circuits and churches. Let's call them hubs, and characterise them in this way:
  - a. A hub which gives support to circuits for resourcing compliance and administration. It might be led by a full-time Regional District Secretary, a lay person who brings explicit experience of running larger organisations. This hub could look after things such as: safeguarding; data handling; property; finance; lay employment; and justice, dignity and solidarity.
  - b. A hub which works in areas of vocations and ministry, supporting lay and ordained ministries. It might be led by a second full-time Regional District Secretary, lay or ordained, who brings experience of the way Methodism works through its various ministries, lay and ordained. This hub could look after such things as: vocations (including candidates and probationers); local preachers and worship leaders; supervision; reconciliation and positive working together; continuing development in ministry. It might also be our primary way of engaging with the Learning Network.
  - c. A third hub might be led directly by the District Chair. This would provide both support and leadership for the District (including the legal and constitutional requirements laid upon a District Chair). It would provide: collaborative and shared oversight of mission; a place to encourage public theology and spiritual leadership; oversight of stationing; and the focus for the, presbyteral ministry of the District through the Chair's role as pastor to the pastors and the shared discipline embodied in the presbyteral session of synod.

All sorts of questions arise, to which we might together imagine different answers. For example:

- Should the deputy chairs be separated from circuit responsibilities, or should they be a part-time role; in which case might this be something a superintendent does, or something for another circuit presbyter? Thus, further consideration as to the time commitment required for this role is needed, including how best to help connect up and support the circuits and ecumenical or other partnerships existing within the particular mission area.
- What principles will decide the way in which the circuits to be grouped under a deputy chair should be decided? Should they be shaped around our current familiar boundaries, or by paying attention to local authority boundaries, or where good communication links are? Retaining more continuity with present district boundaries might be more straightforward or justified in some instances, but there might also be opportunity for a helpful more radical reconfiguration in some areas for the present and future. More consideration as to the mission areas or groups is therefore required.

## Section 4: What might a Regional District look like?





## Section 4: Regional District Policy Committee (Trustees)

If a regional District were to be shaped in the way described above, it would need a group of trustees, the District Policy Committee. This will be a key body in which collegial oversight and mutual accountability at regional level will be focused. Here is a suggestion for a constitution.

One lay Methodist member from each group of circuits. (4/5 people)

One minister, ordained or lay, from each group of circuits. (4/5 people)

Three Hub Leaders (Regional District Chair and two Regional District Secretaries)

Up to three co-opted people to ensure good diversity.

A non-voting minutes secretary (an employee in the 'Administration' Hub)

A possible maximum of 16 voting members.

The Synod will be asked to nominate people in ways which will support Justice, Dignity and Solidarity, and in ways which provide for a diversity of perspectives, experience and skills.

- The Hub leaders should be a minority of trustees, but would shape the agenda and advise the thinking of the trustees.
- Together, the Hub leaders would represent the employed and stationed Regional District team to the Trustees.
- The Hub leaders would be accountable to the Trustees meeting as a whole.
- The trustees who are not Hub leaders would inclusively represent local circuits and missional contexts.
- Consideration will be needed about how other district officers, employees and deputy chairs may need to attend at times, to join in and inform discussion.

## Section 6: Issues to be Resolved

To take this imagining further there are several issues which need to be resolved and decided. N.B.:

- These issues are interlinked.
- The issues listed below are not in any priority order.
- Some matters must be understood before the model is proposed to the Methodist Council, whilst other details might be worked on thereafter (or even after a new District has come into being).

### 1. *Finance:*

The Districts between them currently have sufficient funding to pay for a number of roles across the region. Issues which need work include:

- How posts can be funded through a combined District Advance Fund, and on what timescale, paying attention to the need to ensure that any future commitment needs to be identified within current DAF income in any given year.
- Negotiations to establish how the connexional budget would contribute to the funding of the District. Funding would be needed for the District Chair, and with a contribution requested for the deputy chairs for such a model to work. This might be equivalent to something like three to four full-time presbyters (rather than for the five separated Chairs as currently).
- Taking account of existing District commitments.
- Other questions arising from the amalgamation of six or seven budgets of considerable size.

In summary, what might the financial platform for the new District be, and what commitments, projects and posts might be possible?

### 2. *Staffing:*

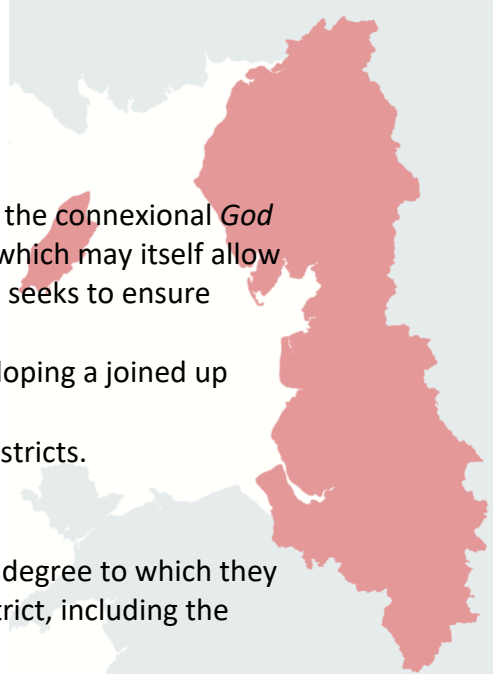
- Consideration of the role and recruitment of District leaders.
- The role and time capacity of the deputy chairs, and should this be standard or dependent on the nature and extent of a mission area.
- The role and deployment of lay employees and volunteers, including requirements, redundancies and redeployment.

### 3. *District Governance and Resourcing:*

- Planning the particular responsibilities within each hub, including the roles of hub leader, committees, networks and other officers.
- The future shape of Synods and the District Policy Committee.
- The relationship with the Learning Network, and with the Safeguarding quadrants.

### 4. *Mission Areas:*

- Delineating the mission areas and determining what might help to ensure a level of common identity and fellowship within them if that assists circuits in their life and mission.

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- Mapping the present diverse responses to *Our Calling* and the connexional *God for All* strategy, and formulating a coherent way forward (which may itself allow diversity and subsidiarity within an overall framework that seeks to ensure connectedness).
  - Mapping and sustaining existing district projects and developing a joined up approach going forwards.
  - Identifying and maintaining good practice in the current districts.

5. *Isle of Man:*

- The Isle of Man District has already begun considering the degree to which they may wish to engage with or draw on any new regional District, including the three resourcing hubs.

6. *Undertaking the work:*

- Task groups are required to consider the first four issues above (the IoM in effect forming its own task group) to enable the investigation, consideration and recommendations to be developed.
- An overall steering group is probably required to consider and integrate the information and recommendations emerging.
- If we were to proceed with this together, the steering group will need to become an implementation group to ensure the effective establishment of the new District on time. The membership of the group may need to change between these stages.
- Membership of these groups needs to involve a blend of skill/experience and representation, and consideration given as to how the members are identified.