

“The Peterborough Circuit seeks become a financially sustainable, growth-oriented community, deeply engaged in mission work, with a clear focus on deepening faith and discipleship, deploying our resources wisely and carefully, investing in the communities from which people are drawn, being attentive to what is happening on the margins, and developing new forms of church.”

Outlined at our Circuit Meeting in May 2023 and presented at Sankofa 3 and adjusted to accept the comment that whilst we recognise the importance of membership, this follows as a consequence of discipleship.

“During my lifetime this Circuit has changed in so many ways but we are challenged to face the future and to seek God’s will for us. If we choose to listen reflect and accept, I know that God will reveal His purposes and surprise us all”

Local Preacher’s Secretary, Peterborough Methodist Circuit, June 2024

This is an update to our 2022 Circuit Strategy, wherein our mission statement read:
. ‘The Peterborough Circuit aims to be the people of God within our communities, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and showing God’s love through worship, witness and service.’

Our circuit consultations from August 2024-2025 gave rise to questions about the link between faith and finance, and the need to find a way forward which is sustainable:

Our immediate priorities in September 2024 are to:

1. Prepare the circuit for one superintendent or alternative forms of support (e.g., Employed Lay Worker, part-time supernumerary minister).
2. Identify individuals called by God to deepen their lay ministry and become part of a team, supporting and working alongside this person, including members of the Local Preachers and Worship Leaders Meeting.
3. Focus on growing churches rather than merely sustaining them.
4. Develop a sustainable budget; help local churches understand Christian giving and costs; explore making it easier for people to give; prioritise share/assessment over building maintenance.
5. Encourage churches to be realistic about mergers and closures, exploring options for increased hope and growth. Work now sows seeds for future discussions— but we would prefer churches to act now.
6. Continue engaging at District and Connexional levels, exploring how we can enable circuits like ours to transition to something new, especially where the financial planning for staffing is concerned, and where fears over future cash flow might inhibit creative thinking.

Detailed Strategy

This document outlines our Circuit Strategy – the first section is draft and will be ratified by the Circuit Meeting in October 2024. The second section is the previous update from 2022, to show continuity. Please note this was adapted for a grant-funding panel who agreed to match-funding towards a Lay Pastoral Assistant (Nurture and Outreach, to support the then second minister. This post remains. Note also that oversight of the two partnership churches referred to; Westgate and Whittlesey, is due to transfer across to the United Reformed Church in September 2025.

1.0 Our Methodist Context

1. Growth and Decline – the National Picture

- The Methodist Church is in a mix of decline and growth, and has diverted significant resources to *God For All*, with a particular focus on encouraging *New Places for New People* (new church plants), and *Church at the Margins* (with a specific focus to supporting poorer communities).
- Evidence suggests that we are good at mission but struggle to grow our churches. This is what is driving our church planting focus, with more resources in this direction. Grant funded support for regular ordained ministry is difficult to find.
- The availability of ministers (presbyters and deacons) is reduced, with some circuits retaining vacancies for two or even three years.
- Smaller circuits of two ministers are considered to be vulnerable because of the pressure this places on ministerial staff, and the circuit's ability to absorb financial pressure. This is driving circuit mergers. This is triggered typically by difficulties in one or other circuit.
- Districts are merging in much the same way. The overall argument is that we are operating a model that was intended for days when we had more churches, more ministers, and more members. Today, the pressures have changed, the skills and expertise needed have changed, and so the roles have changed. The whole of Scotland is one circuit.
- There is an increasing focus on paid-lay ministry within the church to fill roles that would have previously been carried out by volunteers. This is particularly sharp where statutory legislation is concerned.
- Questions around finance, and the sale or repurposing of assets such as churches or manses, is leaving circuits having to invest more in forecasting, and requiring further support to enable cash-flow.

2.0 Local Context in Peterborough

- Whilst our initial questions have been financial and focused on sustainability, we recognise that God is calling us to question the model, focus, and scope of our mission. We also want the focus to be on how we grow.
- The circuit consultations have been a means of listening to people, helping us all understand the pain and pressures, building a sense of mutual responsibility, discussing ideas that are radical to us, and working out where God is guiding us. Following three Sankofa circuit consultation (learning the lessons of the past as we look to the future, two Working Party Meetings, and a Circuit Prayer initiative, the Circuit churches have been separated to cover three mission areas – River North, River South, and East-West Partnership. We have asked these churches to explore further the benefits of mutual support, sharing services and resources.
- One significant area of partnership is in mutually supporting the ordained ministry of the United Reformed Church, and the Church of England, or in deep investment in the work of Churches Together. In response we recognise that the East-West Partnership area has significant potential for expanding this work in different forms. In 2025 two of our LEP Churches are due to return to URC oversight.
- The funding shortfall, prior to the circuit beginning this journey was significant at around 40% below what is required to break even, because the circuit has drawn from its reserves to ease the financial burden on the churches. This was exacerbated by covid and the increase in cost of living. Crucial work is being done, and needs to continue, on helping people understand our costs, how we share in this, and our wider resources. This figure of 40% has been modified and is now at 27%. However, the figure assumes two ministers going forward, and retaining our lay-employees, some of which is grant funded with the remainder matched by us. We are concerned at the use of our reserves in this way, and are committed to remedying this.
- Financially, the District is underwriting us as we move forward to produce a Superintendent's profile. Peterborough's position is not unique, but we have taken the lead in liaising with the District over how circuits that are facing transition, and relying on the cash-flow from the sales of properties, can gain the confidence to make financial decisions. Our superintendent has presented twice to the District Executive, and to the District Superintendent's meeting. We have submitted a memorial to conference, with the support of the District Chair. Despite our shortfall, Peterborough is being celebrated as a circuit that is looking to the future.

3.0 Concern for the well-being of ministers, lay volunteers, our need of shared ministry

- Concern has been for the well-being of our ministers has always been a priority; ministers cover multiple churches. We have also seen an increase in the administrative load on local church officers. Meanwhile the position of the Methodist Church is that we have a shortage of ministers, such that supply is not guaranteed. In our planning we have focused on modelling the impact of one minister on the plan, with and increased focus on increased lay support. We reluctantly have also modelled for no ordained minister and the alternative support from which we can draw. **Whatever the model of support (ordained minister, lay worker, retired minister at half-time, we will need to form a team around them.**
- The main drawback on ministers serving multiple congregations is one of being able to provide consistent support in one place. This said, apart from in two cases, all of our churches request ministers to lead services at 1030 on a Sunday. Therefore, we are seeing the merging of congregations, by necessity.

4.0 On potential mergers/closures

- The Sanofka process (documents available on the website) illustrate how we have tried to explore mergers and the redevelopment or sale of church buildings as part of a strategy moving forward.
- Whilst churches recognise the benefits of united worship and perhaps merging, the potential loss of buildings and identity is a major stumbling block. It requires a careful response from ministers with pastoral charge. Even though we see may be potential in something bigger and bolder, the challenges exist.

The loss of a chapel is a grief process.

We need to present a vision of something greater which eases this.

We need to encourage people to remain part of our Methodist family.

We need to retain people's giving.

Our focus also needs to be on growth, on helping people to understand the nature of giving ('generous giving' in John Wesley's term), and whilst we can see churches coming to a natural closure, we wish to resist the situation in which we lack the energy and resource to work more creatively.

- It should be noted that the circuit has closed two churches in recent years owing to a lack of trusteeship. We anticipate the closure of a third, with, we hope, the option to explore the future more creatively.

5.0 Some general points

- Whilst we value presbyters, lay employees are likely to be the best route to give us stability. This is because:
 - (a) They demonstrate that the circuit understands what they are asking of

ministers, that we want to help our ministers stay focused, and do not expect our ministers to do everything.

(b) They offer resilience should ministerial cover not be possible.

(c) Lay-employee posts have greater flexibility (hours, duration) and lower cost.

(d) Lay-employees can bring skills the ministers do not have.

(e) Presently, grant funding is easier to source for lay employees vs ministers.

The appointment of lay employees has been driven by the ministers stating how they see that by focusing on a specific – sometimes small task – we can make a significant difference.

It is possible for layworkers to preach, and to give extended communion, or event to have a dispensation to preside. (We have two offers of support)

The growing focus on lay workers in the church, and every church having a properly commissioned lay pastor, has been over 20 years in the making. We have a Lay Pastoral Assistant in post already, supporting a minister, whose focus is on outreach.

- We value that which ministers bring, which is beyond worship, the sacraments, the governance; namely the ability to help churches discern their vision, and nurture people. Our present pattern of ministry leaves our resources spread thinly to the point that it is compromising the consistency that staff might offer. We are already seeing some practical changes being forced – for example, on the Plan we are merging congregations so that ministers can retain a monthly contact.
- We lament the lower numbers of people attending churches, and the decline of membership, but we cannot deny that God is doing a work among us. Generally, we are making new members, and there is some evidence of flourishing. Our concern is to ensure that we see an overall increase in membership across the circuit.
- Over the past year we have seen a significant decline in the number of local preachers available, but we do have more preachers in training. The number of ‘own arrangements’ in churches are increasing. The resources we can provide through The Vine, and Methodist Church resources, is significant. However, we are still asking much of local church stewards and worship leaders when we plan OA’s.
- There is joy over the uniting of congregations at Circuit Services in the morning.
- If we were to think of ourselves more as a circuit, as a movement for people, and to highlight the work that is being done across our churches to provide life-preserving, life-changing support, and community, our contribution is startling and arguably beyond the scope and scale of other charities working across

Peterborough, but we are not used to thinking or presenting ourselves in this way.

- One strength is in our ecumenical work with the URC and the Church of England, and our partnerships with other agencies such as the Light Project, Methodist Homes, and Foodbanks.
- The Livestream is seen as a positive contribution to life across the circuit. It enables, for some people, a spiritual discipline. It encourages people to make a link with a local church. The initial results of a review in terms of reach and engagement have been positive, but more work needs to be done to understand the link between livestream and deepening church commitment. It is also difficult to understand how Livestream is raising the profile of the Circuit generally, projecting an image of faith, joy, and hope to those who engage, even just for seconds.

6.0 Suggested ideas we still need to work on:

- How we might resource our churches differently, prioritising come centres for Worship on a Sunday, and others midweek. Perhaps Centres of Worship and Centres of Mission. Oundle hold alternate Sunday, then midweek worship.
- We need to look at what we want from our circuit layworkers, and how they work in partnership with ministers. (Note, circuit layworkers are different from local church layworkers). To an extent this needs to be decided by an incoming superintendent, but we need to give them options.
- Since we are going for growth, one recommendation is to form a Believing and Belonging Group; how do we pool our resources. We might hold circuit rather than local church membership classes and faith refreshers. Our advertising is poor; how do we present ourselves as a circuit.
- The vision for uniting our churches and forming a larger church needs to start with one church who says, 'We are interested in this!' and then the Circuit can enable a conversation. This needs to come from a church council. (Raised in Sankofa 2)

7.0 Towards a Superintendent's Profile

Please note that this was reported to the Circuit Meeting in May 2024, and thereafter the profile has been set by the Circuit Invitation Committee

Whilst we may not know the churches over which the new superintendent will work, we have been able to identify some priorities and the expertise we need. The profile is the responsibility of the Circuit Stewards in partnership with the invitation committee, however we need someone who is:

- Open to the challenge of helping a circuit reconfigure and grow.
- Experienced in closures, mergers, and planting new congregations.
- Capable of enabling large mission project involving property.
- Ecumenical; willing to develop a sustainable pattern of working with the URC.
- Confident to work in a mixed team of lay and ordained staff.

Peterborough will be an exciting prospect because:

- We can evidence that we are asking difficult questions and taking sustainability and mission seriously.
- There are examples of churches that are growing.
- We already offer lay support for ordained staff; administrator, bookkeeper, circuit layworkers, and local church layworkers.
- The District have underwritten the Superintendent's post.
- There is a change of doing something that makes a difference here.

8.0 Separate to the Superintendent's Profile, developing our relationship with the URC.

- We have two Methodist-URC LEP's, and one three-way Methodist-URC-Church of England LEP
- The current pattern of working in Westgate New Church and Whittlesey presents financial difficulties in that when the oversight changes between denominations, the finance received by the circuit towards the cost of ministry reverses. Currently, we receive 92% of the costs of ministry, and the URC receive 8%. This is not workable for the circuit.
- Ideally the LEP depends on an alternating pattern of ministry. At present, this is held by the superintendent. However, the incoming superintendent must be Methodist.
- The way in which we work together in partnership needs to change. This has been recognised by the URC. The vision is for the URC Synod to begin explorations about whether they might be able to receive an Ecumenical Minister (via a different route of staffing), who may come with some form of grant support towards stipend).
- In order for this to happen – and to have even more confidence in our unfolding conversations, the following statements, were adopted by the Circuit Meeting in May 2024:
 1. We rejoice at the work done in partnership between the Methodist Church and The United Reformed Church at Westgate New Church and Whittlesey.
 2. We welcome conversations about how we might develop this partnership such that it can be more wide-reaching, and sustainable.
 3. It is in our nature for our churches to receive ministry from ministers of other denominations, and this has been part of our practice in the past.
 4. We are prepared to *explore* the option of two ministers in the circuit; a Methodist Superintendent, and a URC ecumenical minister covering a section that includes Westgate and Whittlesey, and additional churches.
 5. We welcome the prospect of grant funding to enable this post in the first instance, and welcome conversations about what resources we might bring to bear.
 6. We will prioritise this focus in our Superintendent's profile for 2025.
- As an addendum to this, at present (August 2024) we are still in conversation with the URC, who feel that they needed more churches to come under the ministry of a new incumbent for a full-time post. We have created a new Partnership Area, including two more churches (Oundle and Crowland) who either receive ministry from other denominations, and/or who are deeply committed to Churches Together. The lack of funding, and the funding difference between URC and Methodist Church ministry makes a full time post unlikely. We await further information from the URC on how these churches might be supported.

For continuity: Mission Statement Update from 2022.

Peterborough Circuit May 2022 update

Peterborough Methodist Circuit of Churches

Mission Statement, Strategy, and Supporting Evidence

This section summarises the circuit policy and its relevance to the mission and ministry across the section.

1.0 Mission Statement:

“The Peterborough Methodist Circuit aims to be the people of God within our communities, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and showing God’s love through worship, witness and service.” -

www.peterboroughmethodistcircuit.org/missionstrategy

2.0 Mission Strategy:

1. We will build up individuals and congregations in faith.
2. We will let go of things of the past which have completed their work, and look to the future confident in God, with a willingness to take risks.
3. We will build for the future on prayer, with sufficient resources, in partnership with others.
4. We will reach out into our communities in grateful response to God’s grace and share our faith through loving word and deed.

3.0 Recent work arising from this:

We retain regular engagement with the District Mission Enabler who resides within the circuit.

Post lockdown, the Circuit Meeting (or staff working in the interests of the circuit) have committed to the following measures:

3.1 In Respect of Point 1

We have supported churches financially during the pandemic, by negotiating individually with our churches and drawing on our reserves to alleviate the strain. Meanwhile, through our weekly bulletins we have encouraged and enabled our churches in authentic discipleship

3.2 We committed to developing small groups – many of which shifted to on-line or retaining contact via phone over the lockdown. We continue this emphasis on small group development by assessing what is happening (there are excellent examples that we should celebrate and give inspiration to others), and signposting people to resources that they might find useful. (Point 1)

3.3 The circuit is looking to support its churches and developing its wider ministry by creating three posts, whilst the funding the circuit has been able to inject has been low, support has come from the local churches, or from the wider District. We anticipate that these posts will be filled by September 2023. These part-time posts are:

A support worker post for Westgate New Church for BoB (Back of Beyond) fellowship group, based at Westgate New Church and funded by local giving and delayed grants from The Methodist District and The United Reformed Church synod.

A Lay Pastoral Assistant to our second presbyter (who is focused on engaging with groups and newcomers). This role was discerned through our previous co-superintendent as we identified the need to provide better follow-up and continuity. This is funded through a mix of Circuit and District funding, and was considered a priority.

A Children's, Youth, and Family Worker, based at Whittlesey following their Mission Action Plan working. This is funded through a generous bequest made to the local church, and matchfunding through the URC Synod. It is likely that we will turn to the Methodist District for support in phase two of what is a significant project that looks to improve welcome, visibility, and access.

3.4 In Respect of Point 2

Sadly, we have had to let go of a chapel, after having explored its potential as a circuit mission centre and a place for fresh expressions (over some years), because we lack the resources locally or circuit wide to support and justify its continued use.

3.5 We have weathered the curtailment of two ministers, both for understandable reasons; one on the grounds of ill-health (their appointment to Peterborough was a return to ministry), another to take a break from ministry to support their family.

3.6 The Circuit has shown considerable grace and resilience, trusting that just as we exercise this towards others, God's blessing will return to us. In the case of the latter post, we benefitted clearly from an injection of support and expertise that surfaced as a result of adopting cosuperintendency. We have modelled what it is to look to the future with faith and have confidence in God.

3.7 The circuit has encouraged churches to adopt more flexible ways of working, particularly in terms of leading worship, resulting in a shift towards alternating forms of worship on Sunday mornings (café church or fellowship gatherings one week led by worship leaders, and services led by preachers the next). This involves an element of risk in developing new work.

3.8 In respect of Point 3

There has been much ecumenical work with the United Reformed Church to consider how we retain a Methodist presence in the city centre – and this has involved a diversion of resources to allow our superintendent minister to focus on this work. We have maintained and developed our partnership with the Church of England, and with other charities. We now also have a Methodist presence withing Churches Together in Central Peterborough, whose particular charism is one of identifying needs, starting new work, and handing this over to lay leaders so that it can thrive.

3.9 As a result of our Livestream ministry, we have become more aware of, and determined to support those who cannot attend church because they are involved in shift work, care for family, or who are unwell themselves. Our policy is to encourage people to become part of a local church – but the daily witness provided by our livestream, our focus on morning prayers, and our engagement with what is happening in the world is helping people in their discipline of prayer. We understand, from our Mission Enabler, that this blend and pattern (with its focus on being live and open) is unique within the District, and possibly across the Connexion. We continue to focus also on paper resources, for those who are not able to engage digitally, and to consider how we are as inclusive as possible.

3.10 In terms of our partnership with the District and the Connexion, our superintendent minister serves on the connexional guiding group from New Places, New People, is a coach for the Pioneer Pathway and has been nominated to serve on the District Executive. Our Lead Circuit steward has a background in HR and Project Management and is serving on the District Lay Employment Group.

3.11 Westgate New Church recently partnered with Equipping the Saints (and ecumenically open organisation) to run an evangelism course in central Peterborough, in partnership with the superintendent. In addition, we have developed links with Good News For Everyone (formerly Gideons UK) which we feel may be beneficial in encouraging local churches. We are also considering how the Methodist Church's course 'Everyone an Evangelist' might be helpful in some settings.

3.12 In respect of Point 4

There are significant examples of this across the circuit, but the following may assure the panel:

During the pandemic the circuit developed new work for those who had essential needs, particularly in the areas of parent/carer support, and youth support across Southside and Oundle.

3.13 Oundle Methodist Church continues to explore the viability of partnership with Oundle Baptist Church in mission.

3.14 Westgate New Church drew together a consortium of stakeholders; those who let the church premises (housing Peterborough Christian Books, CROPS (Christian Options for Peterborough Schools), and Peterborough Association for the Blind, in a move to build greater solidarity in light of the North Westgate Development (a plan to redevelop the centre of Peterborough which may well impact the Church. The circuit has been given authority to recruit an individual to serve as the co-coordinator for BoB, a 'lunch-club plus' project looking to reach those who are situated in or feel that they live in 'the Back of Beyond'. The URC has provided grant funding for this. We are seeking permission to draw down, later than anticipated, on funds awarded to us previously by the Methodist District.

3.15 Dogsthorpe Methodist Church became the singular point of entry for Foodbank assistance during the lockdown and provides a base for an independent pre-school. Crowland Methodist Church in partnership with the Church of England continued to offer a Community Larder and beyond the lockdown, a community meal for families struggling with low income. Meanwhile Brookside Methodist Church excels in its ministry through the Boys Brigade (drawing in leaders from other areas), providing a

home for other uniformed organisations, and running a Church owned pre-school. Finally, Yaxley Methodist Church have started a toddler group.

3.16 Emerging from the lockdown Southside Methodist Church worked with the Light Project Peterborough to host a Homelessness Pod in its car park. Work within this area was an extension of the previous work carried out across the circuit with churches offering themselves as a Night Shelter project.

3.17 Whittlesey Methodist/URC Church has now been recognised as a community hub for Ukrainian Refugees – and two of its families are giving refugees a home.

3.18 In our most recent stationing form (2022), we have stated:

- We are constantly looking to reach out and develop new relationships with those who live in the communities that we serve.
- Our ministry team is strongly ecumenical. We believe we achieve more working in partnership than working on our own.
- Development of new ways of worship is key to our future and we actively seek out and encourage new ways of bringing the love of Jesus to those who would struggle with traditional worship
- We look to recognise, use and develop the abilities and skills of lay people within the circuit. We actively encourage people to explore what their gifts are and how God is calling them to serve. We are committed to making and growing disciples.
- We believe that God calls us to work together as a team in which we all share responsibility for ministry and are accountable to each other. We are seeking to utilise and ensure the abilities and skills of lay people fully in the circuit and encourage others to explore and offer themselves for service at all levels as equal partners in our work.