



The Methodist Church

North Lancashire Methodist Circuit

www.northlancsmethodist.org.uk

Registered Charity Number: 1155398

9 February 2021

Dear Friends

Re: Clustering for Renewal

This letter comes to you and all other members and regular attendees at all our churches across the North Lancashire Circuit from the Circuit Stewards. We pray for each and every person who reads it as you may find it hard to read and no doubt you may need to read it a few times. We pray that you will see the exciting prospects ahead of us and that you will want to actively share in this opportunity to grow the Kingdom in our area.

A couple of years ago the Circuit Meeting heard a presentation entitled “Hard Truths” which set out some of the problems that we were in danger of facing due to our reducing numbers. Unfortunately, some of these Hard Truths are no longer a possibility but are now a reality. Rev David Philo retires at the end of August and Rev Derek Oldham retired last month; this means that in September we will only have four ministers in the North Lancashire Circuit.

We need to find a way for us to go forward as a Circuit of nineteen churches and chapels, which range in size from over 100 members to two chapels with just 11 members, and which are spread over a very wide geographical area with only four ministers. We have now reached the point when we truly have to face our changing demographic and reducing numbers. This is not an easy task, we will have to make changes and we will have to make them soon, very soon. We believe that Clustering for mission is the way that we should go forward.

There are also two other reasons, outside our control, that will force us to cluster the churches. The first is that The Conference has already directed all Circuit Meetings to review the number of Church Councils in their Circuit and to encourage Church Councils to work together to determine the best way of working to achieve the minimum number of trustee bodies necessary to fulfil our calling. The second reason is a forthcoming decision at Connexion level which is expected to vote that the minimum number of members for a church to be viable is to be increased from six to somewhere between 12 and 25; the stark reality of this is that between seven and ten of our churches would cease to be viable unless they are linked to another fellowship.

We need to do more than batten down the hatches and form into larger groups – that would only be to step on an End of Life Plan; instead we must develop a Plan for Growth. As a team of Stewards, we have given this a great deal of thought and prayer; we have met, separately from the staff, to think about the future of our church in our Circuit and our Plan for Growth. As in battle, there is a need at times to re-group, and we are at that stage here in North Lancashire. We have reached a time when we have to start clustering churches and chapels so that, in addition to complying with Conference directives, we can share our energy, experience and expertise to grow again.

If we are to survive, it is essential that we fulfil our calling to grow the Kingdom, we need to join forces by forming clusters which can work as teams with new energy – this is a huge opportunity as it will mean that day-to-day tasks and roles can be shared freeing up others to take on initiatives and new missional activity. Some of you will have realised that three of our larger churches in the Morecambe area have already started discussions about ways of working together. Also, Lancaster works with this model – Scotforth Road and The Cornerstone – two very different locations, with very different worshipping communities and very different work going-on, celebrate 20 years as one church at Easter 2021.

Now, we want to assure you that this is not a plot to close down buildings (that might occur in the future, but hopefully the resultant growth will reverse any such considerations). Nor is there any intention to take away local identities – we all need to continue to witness in our own locations. In fact, this is a route to keep our viable buildings open and our physical presence in as many places as possible.

So, what next? We currently expect the churches and chapels will be grouped into clusters, as shown on the attached diagram; this works geographically for ministerial oversight. Whilst we do expect some common themes to emerge, we are not expecting each cluster to work in the same way, as we have very different characteristics, between rural and town communities, between those who have been used to being minister-led and those who have traditionally been more independently minded. We have some examples, which we will share with you, of how other circuits have tackled this and we hope that you will be able to pick out ideas that may help develop your own situations.

We strongly encourage you to grasp this as an exciting opportunity for mission. Please talk with the other churches and chapels in your cluster and with your designated cluster minister to start thinking about how we can all contribute to growing the Kingdom together. If you would like a Circuit Steward to join in your conversations to support you and to share ideas then please do contact us by sending an email to circuit.stewards.northlancs@gmail.com and we will respond.

Friends, please do remember that this is NOT about closing individual churches or chapels, it is about re-grouping for growth and mission. Let's work together to grow the Kingdom and to turn our Circuit into a model that others will want copy.

Grace and peace



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on behalf of the Circuit Stewards

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