

OUR CALLING GOVERNANCE – CIRCUIT MEETING

A reminder of 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.

It does this through:

Worship - The Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love

Learning and Caring - The Church exists to help people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care

Service - The Church exists to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice

Evangelism - The Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ

A question: how much of our resources – our time, energy, money & skills – are our churches currently able to use to focus on these things?

As churches, do we mainly focus on our vision, our mission?

Or are our resources consumed to a large extent by other issues, such as property and finance? These ARE important, and need to be managed well, but Our Calling is what we are about as church.

The PRAG report – now 2 years old – identified this imbalance in the use of our resources, and recognised that the situation would get harder for all our churches as already elderly congregations aged, members died, finances reduced, property upkeep became more challenging and key roles within the church became harder to fill. All of which makes it even more difficult to fulfil Our Calling. The effects of Covid have accelerated this, and this year's October count shows that numbers attending worship now are considerably lower than before the pandemic. There is no guarantee that they will – or can - bounce back. Membership numbers have also suffered over the last two years.

It is with that background that the Reimagine process of restructuring the circuit took root. And although the timeline included in the response paper to 'Casting the Net on the Other Side' has slipped a bit, we are now getting back on track.

Which brings us to the issue of Governance. The Circuit Leadership Team brought to the last Circuit Meeting a proposal concerning governance which the meeting agreed, almost unanimously, should be presented to Church Councils across the circuit. That is what we are doing at this meeting. Church Council members will then make a decision whether or not their church will opt in.

Firstly a caveat: this proposal does NOT presume or depend on the closure or groupings of churches as per the models mentioned in 'Casting the Net on the Other Side'. It is a pragmatic way forward towards managing scarce resources whether we retain the same number of worshipping communities as now, or if we consolidate in the future into 6, 3 or 1 worshipping community.

The proposal is that the Northampton Methodist Circuit creates one 'church' – the Northampton Methodist Church (NMC) - with multiple worshipping communities, i.e. current churches who choose to opt in. Emmanuel, because of its constitution, would still be part of the circuit, but not of this one church. VERY IMPORTANT: the phrase 'the Northampton Methodist Church' DOES NOT mean a building, NOR a

gathered community, but rather one trustee body for all the worshipping communities. It means that members of the worshipping communities which join the NMC will become members of the NMC. In other words, we will all be members of one church, the NMC, whilst fulfilling Our Calling across the town on many sites and in many ways. For those of you who remember Methodist classes, it's a similar idea: you are a member of a church, but function as such through your class. It can perhaps best be described as a Multi-Site Church. So the worshipping communities across the circuit could be called 'The Northampton Methodist Church in Duston – in Kingsthorpe – in Kingsley – in Harpole' etc.

How would this proposal help us to address the issues I outlined earlier – that each of our churches is struggling to fulfil Our Calling because we are bogged down dealing with other issues?

The Northampton Methodist Church would function like any other Methodist Church. Following guidance in Standing Orders, it would have an elected Church Council made up of members from all of the worshipping communities, and hold CC meetings which any member could attend. It would hold Annual Church Meetings for all members. It would have committees for e.g. finance. The members of the Northampton Methodist Church Council, as the Trustees of the Northampton Methodist Church, would take on the Church Council responsibilities of all the worshipping communities which are part of it. Members of this Church Council would NOT be representing 'their' worshipping community, but obviously their knowledge and understanding of their worshipping community will inform and guide the work of the Church Council.

The intention is for the NMC Council to set the strategic direction of mission and to fulfil its statutory duties regarding governance (including finance and property). The real benefit is it will then free up the resources of the local worshipping communities to focus on Our Calling: worship, learning & caring, service, evangelism – in other words, their local mission & outreach. It will NOT be a top down approach. There will be constant dialogue and feedback between the NMC Council and its worshipping communities, because the needs and efforts of each community are the pieces of the jigsaw for the NMC picture.

Let's see what this means practically:

The members of the NMC Council would be responsible for finance. As we will all be members of the NMC, there will be no separate assessments for each worshipping community. All monies will go to the NMC, and the NMC Council will manage finances accordingly. It will also be proactive in applying for grants and loans when appropriate. For example, it may be that a particular worshipping community has identified a specific need for support for new parents in its area. Or it may be that the NMC Council recognises the lack of community in an area of new housing. Resources to meet these needs will become the responsibility of the NMC Council.

Individual worshipping communities will no longer need a treasurer, although a 'book keeper' will be required to take on cash handling responsibilities, and to report statistics (e.g. October Count) to the circuit treasurer. Church treasurers are not easy to find or replace, and many churches struggle to find someone with the required skill set. By 2030 the role will have become considerably more difficult as each church will have to register with the Charity Commission and meet its requirements; this will mean a LOT more work for church treasurers. By becoming part of the NMC, worshipping communities will no longer need to worry about this.

When it comes to property, the members of the Northampton Methodist Church Council would be responsible for proposing major property decisions, including work costed above an agreed level, drawing on professional advice as appropriate. Worshipping communities would deal with basic maintenance issues, such as gardening, with support & oversight from the NMC Council. Property issues have dominated the agenda in so many church councils for several years, and they will only get worse as time goes on. Regardless of decisions made about Governance, hard decisions are going to have to be made about a number of church buildings in this circuit, in some cases sooner rather than later. But remember, churches can be church without owning a building. If the NMC Council takes on the responsibility for property, in dialogue with its members, then once again worshipping communities will be free to focus on what we should really be about: Our Vision for the Circuit and our area, and fulfilling Our Calling – which can take place without owning a building.

Another benefit of one Northampton Methodist Church is that there would be a single Safeguarding Officer for the church and its worshipping communities. There also needs to be a Safeguarding Officer for the Circuit, but that can be the same person. Safeguarding is a vital area of church life, so to have one person doing this role ensures consistency & confidence across all worshipping communities.

As for each worshipping community, people based there will be enabled to focus on worship, learning & caring, service & evangelism, responding to the Circuit vision, just as they currently do: for example, worship planning, pastoral care, work with young people, etc, along with any local ecumenical arrangements. They will do this through local team(s), formed within the context of each worshipping community.

A Northampton Methodist Church Council will not replicate or replace the work of the Northampton Methodist Circuit Meeting, which is responsible for invitations, ministerial stipends and is the employing body for lay staff.

We believe that this idea of a Multi-Site Church, with one CC will make us stronger across the Circuit, and enable us to move forward as a whole. Unless we move to this way of working, evidence indicates there will soon be burn out in individual churches, making us increasingly less effective in a growing town. And it may be that in the future the NM Circuit will merge with other circuits. In that event, the NMC Council would be a strong body for all Northampton worshipping communities.

This proposal is not radical. Recognising the strains which many churches are under, Conference endorsed as a way forward the creation of single Church Councils with consolidation of Governance & Trusteeship across several churches. It is already a reality in a number of circuits.

The purpose of this meeting is to ensure all church councils hear the same information and the same answers to questions given. The decision of whether or not to become part of Northampton Methodist Church will be made by each Church Council at a future meeting.

If any church decides not to join the NMC, then its Church Council will remain as its Trustee Body, with responsibility for paying the required assessment each quarter, and dealing with all issues, including

finance and property, which arise, as currently. The church will, of course, still be part of the Northampton Methodist Circuit.

So, to sum up, we are proposing:

- Adopting the idea of a Multi-Site Church across the Circuit (excluding Emmanuel);
- Calling the Multi-Site Church the Northampton Methodist Church;
- Existing churches become Worshipping Communities of the Northampton Methodist Church;
- Everyone in the Worshipping Communities is a member of the Northampton Methodist Church;
- The Northampton Methodist Church Council has members from all Worshipping Communities.
- The vision of the Northampton Methodist Church Council informs the strategic direction of mission;
- The Northampton Methodist Church Council fulfils its statutory duties regarding property, finances and safeguarding;
- The Worshipping Communities are enabled to focus on 'Our Calling': Worship, Learning & Caring, Service and Evangelism via local teams.

In a nutshell, we propose: The setting up of Northampton Methodist Church, made up of multiple Worshipping Communities, i.e. a Multi-Site Church, with a single Church Council.