

Response to 'Casting the Net on the Other Side' Northampton Methodist Circuit Consultation

Introduction

As agreed at the last Circuit Meeting, a booklet entitled 'Casting the Net on the Other Side' was distributed to all members and adherents across the Circuit in December 2020.

This booklet spelt out clearly the need to **Reimagine the Northampton Circuit** to enable us to be better equipped for mission, and the challenges facing us in order to achieve this.

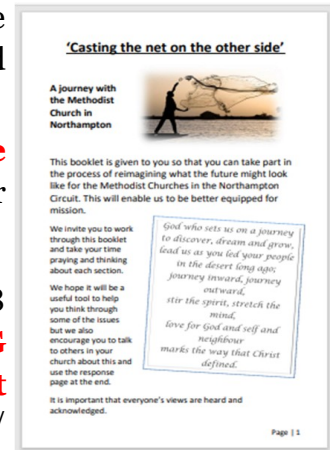
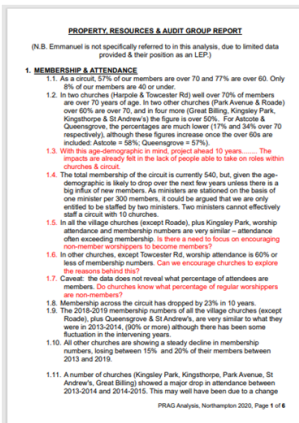
It described the journey the Circuit has been on for the last 18 months, beginning with the information provided in the **PRAG**

(Property, Resource & Audit Group) **report**

(<https://methodist-churches-northampton.org.uk/messages/reimagining-northampton-circuit/>), which

highlighted the difficulties being faced by all churches across the Circuit in the areas of personnel, finance, property and vision for the future.

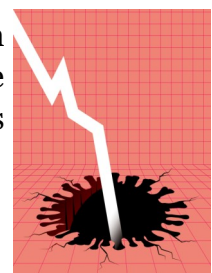
The effect of Covid in exacerbating these issues was recognised. Several consultations in 2020 had led to the creation of three possible ways forward for the Circuit. It is these three 'models' which were outlined in the booklet.



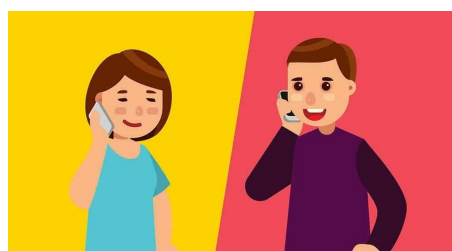
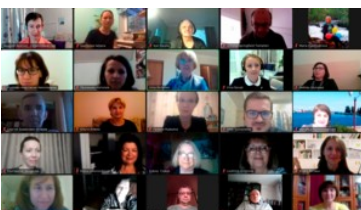
In addition, people were encouraged to read the PRAG report and to look at the latest Circuit financial information before responding.

It was recognised that the middle of a pandemic made such a consultation more difficult, but it is a fact that we cannot afford to wait until everyone can meet in person to discuss the situation in which individual churches and the Circuit as a whole find themselves.

The effect of Covid on church and Circuit finances in particular has hastened the need to make decisions concerning the way forward for the Circuit.



Churches did manage to consult widely via Zoom for group chats, one-to-one phone calls and doorstep discussions among other ways.



By the end of February, **155 responses** to the consultation had been received from all churches. They ranged from fully developed visions for a way forward to those who poured out their hearts about their church and those who stated only their preference for a particular model. Every single response was read and logged, and from those responses a number of key points and common threads can be drawn.

We were heartened by the thoughtful way in which so many people engaged with this.

Two key points:

Before we look at the responses to the consultation in more detail, there are two points to make:

The first is about **communication**.

For some people, the whole concept of Reimagining the Circuit and the practical outworking of this seem to have come as a complete surprise. Granted, we have rarely been able to meet in person for the last year which has not helped.

However, this conversation and the process began before any lockdown, having been an agenda item at Circuit Meetings since March 2019, so it is concerning that some of our church family were seemingly unaware.



There is a message here, both for the CLT and Church Councils, of the need to keep our church family informed and updated regularly about Circuit & church issues.



The second point goes to the heart of the Reimagining process, and was mentioned in several responses: namely, the need to have **a vision for the Circuit** for the next 10 years. When we have a shared vision, we can prayerfully more effectively plan the journey.

To this end we propose that the Circuit Policy committee is asked to reconsider the current mission statement as an input into our thinking.

Below are the key points and common threads which came through in the responses to each of the models.

Model A

Model A:

Perhaps the most adventurous and challenging approach in which management, governance, worship and other activities are centralised.

Close all the current churches but create one central hub for a base and resource centre and focus on church plants in the new areas (using community centres, for example).

With reference to Model A, responses ranged from **‘Brilliant. Should have done it years ago’** to **‘Too drastic’, ‘Too radical’**. This model clearly excited a number of people, who presented their vision of how to move towards this outcome and what it would look like. For others, whilst recognising its appeal, they saw a number of challenges. And for yet others, it was seen as unworkable, with too much of value across the circuit being lost.

Village churches:

Several people saw this model as the fairest option, as all churches would be in the same position. However, it was also suggested that the outlying village churches (Astcote, Harpole & Roade) should remain:



Astcote & Harpole in particular both have very specific local missions, and Roade is the only Methodist church for a number of miles. Distance to Northampton is also a factor in perhaps keeping these open.



PRAG report:

As some pointed out, Model A would address the property issues identified in the PRAG report, particularly those of the three largest church buildings in the Circuit. It would also reduce the number of people currently required to cover key roles within individual churches (stewards, treasurer, property, etc), another major issue raised in the PRAG report.



In addition, next year the staff team will be smaller. There will be one less member of the ministerial team and current assumptions do not assume replacement of the pastoral lay worker.

The age-profile in the PRAG report indicates that the number of members across the Circuit will continue to fall and so the Circuit could potentially lose a presbyter in the next stationing round. Ministerial workload for 10 churches and support for the Emmanuel LEP has to be taken into account.

Modern church:

It was suggested that a large, modern church, equipped with the latest technology, with a range of facilities would enable worship in a variety of forms.



It could provide for community groups, as well as acting as a centre and a springboard for mission & outreach across the town. It could attract new people, including families and young people.



At the same time, the bringing together of experience, expertise and enthusiasm from across the Circuit could be harnessed to do better together what we now struggle to do as individuals and small churches. It would also help us to move forward to new work and new areas.

Greater use of technology, in particular, was identified as a major part of the future, with the opportunity to live stream services to those unable to get to church amongst other benefits.



Location:

The location of such a church generated many comments. For some, the town centre was not seen favourably, because of perceived lack of parking (despite the presence of many car parks), accessibility (particularly for people without transport), safety (especially at night), environmental issues, and the difficulty of finding a good site of an appropriate size and affordability. It was also mentioned that there are already a number of churches in this area.



Others, on the other hand, saw the town centre as THE place to be for our mission and our community work, partly because there will be more and more people living in the town centre over coming years.



Other locations were also mentioned: there was no support for a church away

from the town, but redevelopment of St Andrew's or Kingsthorpe for this Circuit church was suggested as a possibility. Both have parking, are safe and accessible, and the sites are already owned by the Circuit.



Time scale:

One concern was the time scale required to carry out such a major project, given that the information in the PRAG report and the effects of Covid have indicated how precarious is the position of some churches in terms of finance & personnel to keep going.



Interim steps were suggested, such as amalgamating some churches in the short-term with the plan to move to Model A over the course of the next few years. This raised further questions about how to keep churches & congregations 'together' during such a protracted period.

Governance:

A clear specific initial step was to bring together the governance of all Circuit churches so that decisions can be made at a Circuit level regarding the way forward .

Cost:

There were questions about the cost of carrying out such a project, and the cash-flow projections, given the financial state of the Circuit and individual churches within it.



Questions such as these cannot yet be answered, but will form part of the 'next steps' in the Reimagining process when more information about viability is sought.

Local community links:



A number of people saw Model A as leading to the loss of churches in local communities, thus breaking all the strong, valuable links and connections often going back generations.

It was recognised that for many the closure of 'their' church would be devastating & hugely distressing. No one wants their church to close. The need for much pastoral and emotional support during this time of bereavement, grieving & change was seen as vital.

There was a number of suggestions for ways to maintain a local presence even if the actual church building is no longer in use, such as hiring community centres or renting an abandoned shop to use as a base for outreach and support within the local community. As someone pointed out, 'the church is the people, not the building.' However, some questioned how cost effective this would be.



Youth work:



Youth work – which in a number of churches is by far its strongest & most successful outreach & community work – was flagged up by a number of respondents as an issue if there were only one large church building in the Circuit. The need for local spaces large enough for numbers of active youngsters, plus places to store equipment, and also time to set up and clear away, was recognised. This issue is of vital importance.



Fresh start:

Some people relished the idea of a ‘fresh start’, from which Methodism in Northampton could begin to grow and develop into a 21st century church, using a central church building as the base: the hub, from which to move out into other areas, both new and old.

This would provide the opportunity to ‘be church’ in different ways not dependent on dedicated buildings (‘Muddy Church’, ‘Pub Church’, ‘Messy Church’, ‘Breakfast Church’.....). There should also be a growing emphasis on small group discipleship in people’s homes or coffee shops or








Conclusion:

For a number of people, Model A was seen as far too challenging, ‘a sledgehammer to crack a nut’, devastating for individuals and the work churches are doing; for others, they could see both the benefits and difficulties; for still others, the challenges were more than outweighed by the exciting new possibilities this way forward offered.

Key points:

Model A

-  Seen by some as an exciting prospect and offering a fresh start and springboard for mission.
-  Others felt it was the fairest long-term option to work towards.
-  Concerns expressed about possible locations and effect on individuals.
-  Current community focus could be lost without support but also offered the opportunity for different expressions of Church.
-  Have we the capacity to deliver this?

Model B

Model B:

A hybrid re-imagining of the circuit embracing mission to new housing developments alongside a new Town Centre initiative. 3 buildings would close to be replaced by one in the town centre.

1. A CENTRAL Town Centre initiative bringing together Kingsley Park, Queensgrove and Park Avenue on a neutral site.

2. A NORTH-WEST grouping of Kingsthorpe, St Andrew's and Harpole churches with new housing areas at Duston, Upton, Boughton, Dallington Grange etc.

3. A SOUTHERN grouping of Towcester Road, Roade, Astcote and the resource at Wootton. New housing includes Roade, Wootton and Hunsbury.

4. In the EASTERN District the Emmanuel group of 3 congregations continues its outreach as a Local Ecumenical Project (LEP) with support and input from the Methodist Circuit where appropriate. Great Billing could be linked here.

As with Model A, there was a range of responses, from '**excellent idea**' to '**a lost opportunity**'. It is a model with more 'bits' to it, so it is harder to pull out key points and common threads, and there was a tendency to focus on the coming together of the three churches on a neutral site to create a Town Centre initiative, with fewer comments on the suggestions for grouping other churches on a geographical basis.

PRAG Report:



A number of people felt that it would be a short term solution, merely postponing an eventual move to Model A. It was seen as a compromise.

They felt it did not fully address the issues raised by the PRAG report, and would not be cost effective in the long-term. It would still leave some older

buildings which would be costly to maintain, and did not address the paucity of people willing or able to take on leadership roles. Ministers would still be spread too thinly to lead churches effectively.



The point was also made that a new church for all (as per Model A) would generate excitement and energise people across the Circuit; there was a danger that with Model B the focus would be on the Town Centre initiative to the detriment of the rest of the Circuit.

However, other people felt that Model B made property, financial, numerical and personnel sense, addressing these issues from the PRAG report. It was seen as achievable in the short-term, and combining administrative, management & governance roles across churches within each grouping would free people for outreach work. They felt this model would retain many of the local community links and outreach currently happening, and position churches to move forward with this, especially with reference to new housing areas.

Groupings:

Opinion concerning the suggested church groupings was similarly divided. For some, the groupings were logical & sensible; others could not see how the groupings would work. There was confusion about what was meant by the concept of ‘groupings’: was it churches merging, churches sharing governance, or churches working together in various ways (which some are already doing)? The situation regarding Kingsthorpe’s development plans as part of this model was also raised.



However, a number of people felt that grouping churches in this way was a good missional way forward, as it meant all areas of the town were covered, and the churches in the NW, S and E were well-placed for outreach into the new housing in their areas.

Grouping in this way would encourage the sharing of ideas and expertise more widely .

Three-into-One:

Many of the responses to Model B commented on the suggestion that Kingsley Park, Queensgrove & Park Avenue should come together as one church on a neutral site.

Replacing three old buildings with high property maintenance costs with one new building received some support. It was also recognised that replacing three churches with one would reduce the number of people needed for leadership roles.

It was noted that the three churches have been worshipping together during the non-lockdown phases of the pandemic.

However, the distress and sadness for individuals of ‘their’ church closing was also highlighted.



Location:

As with Model A, the 'right' location for the new church building was seen as crucial. A town centre location had some opposition and some support, for the same reasons mentioned in discussing Model A: accessibility; safety; parking; finding a suitable & affordable site; the loss of existing local community links & outreach, especially with reference to youth work, versus a town centre site as a location for new community based work.

As described above, ways forward to help continue with local community links and youth work would need to be explored & found. A neutral site nearer to the three churches was also suggested: this would reduce the opportunities to work within the town centre, but would enable local community work to continue more easily.



Cost:

Again, as with Model A the issues of funding and the time frame were also mentioned. Some people felt that a more cost effective option would be to use one of the existing three churches; others that one of these existing sites could be redeveloped, modernised and renamed.



The lack of car parking at all three churches was recognised as a negative factor, although the idea of buying the building next to Park Avenue, demolish it and use the space as a car park was mooted.

It was questioned whether the Circuit could financially support two building projects: this initiative and Kingsthorpe.

Conclusion:

Model B probably raised more questions than answers. Some could see this as a practical, doable suggestion; others were unsure what it was really about; others felt it didn't solve anything in the long-term.

Key Points:

Model B



Seen by some as providing a way of supporting the mission across the town.



Concern that a new town centre initiative would become the only focus, with finding correct location a priority.



Does this adequately address resource challenges?



Clarification of what is meant by groupings and how they would work.



How quickly could this model be implemented?

Model C

Model C:

Pairing and amalgamating of churches. 2 buildings would close.

1. Queensgrove amalgamate with Towcester Road at the TRMC site and link with/support Roade and Astcote as associated village churches.

2. Kingsley Park amalgamates with Park Avenue on the Park Avenue site and link with Billing as a satellite village church

3. Kingsthorpe & St Andrews work together in a group along with Harpole as an associated village church

4. Emmanuel – 3 congregations of Emmanuel, Boothville and Rectory Farm continue as an LEP (Local Ecumenical Project) with support and input from the Methodist Circuit, as appropriate, alongside Anglican and other Free Church presence.

Like the previous two models, responses to this model ranged widely from **‘The only possible solution’** to **‘This is the worst idea I’ve heard’**, and all positions in between!

PRAG Report:



Some expressed a preference for Model C because it was the least disruptive; others felt that it did not address some of the key issues identified in the PRAG report. Some people saw it as only a short-term solution, which could be implemented quickly, but lacked clarity as a way forward. Others saw it as an interim step to a more radical consolidation. Whether it would deliver sufficient financial savings was questioned. The closure of two of the older, large buildings would help, but would still leave other old buildings with maintenance issues.

Groupings:

A number of people felt the groupings lacked the logic of the Model B groupings, especially pairing Queensgrove with Towcester Rd rather than with Park Avenue – these two churches are a distance apart. Some endorsed the idea of a fresh start for Park Avenue, Queensgrove & Kingsley Park as one church. Others saw the suggested groupings as the most natural.



As with Model B, Model C was seen by some as enabling churches to maintain existing local links & outreach, especially with reference to work with young people, although it was also recognised that this model lacked any focus on the town centre. However, others felt that local mission & outreach by some churches would be narrowed or lost.



Conclusion:

Many of the comments made about Model B were also made about Model C.

Key points:

Model C

- ✓ Seen by some as the least disruptive and easiest to implement.
- 🔍 Seen by some as a short term interim step towards more radical change.
- ⚠️ Not seen as addressing the current challenges.
- ❓ Logic of the groupings challenged.
- 👥 Seen as maintaining local community links.

Other suggestions offered



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- **More ecumenical working** including worship: all churches have similar problems, and should be pooling expertise and resources in our local areas.

- Some mentioned the need to revive **meeting in small, local groups**, perhaps as 'micro-churches' or for fellowship, discipleship, Bible study, etc, as per 'The Methodist Way of Life'.



- The possible **reconfiguring of some churches** as, e.g. a hub for youth work, a cafe, a shop, a drop-in centre, etc was suggested.

- The importance of **developing and extending the use of digital technology** was emphasised by a significant number of people, who saw it as a good way to reach out to more people, especially younger ones, and those unable to travel.

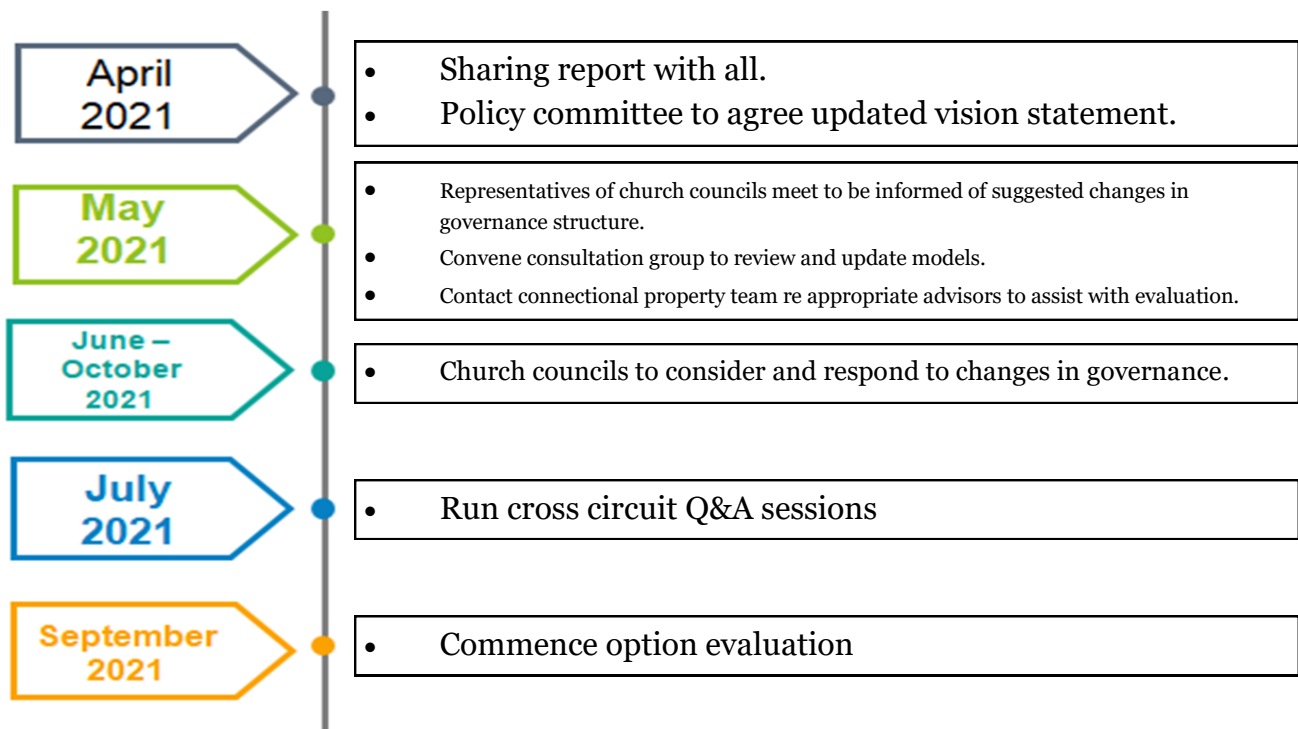


Next Steps

It must be remembered that we should focus on the vision for the future not just on the issues relating to our buildings

- Everyone in the circuit to receive feedback on this consultation.
- Develop the vision for the circuit with an updated Circuit vision statement, to be agreed at the next Circuit meeting following policy committee revision.
- Rationalise the governance of all churches under one Church Council for the Circuit, with a target to commence implementation from 1 September 2021. This would provide for a main decision making body with representation drawn from all current worshipping communities within the Circuit.
- Keep all buildings open while gathering more information involving experts, who will look at the practicalities, possible use of the buildings and costs involved.
- Research into the Digital Church and the resources needed to develop this further.
- Investigate other models suggested in the consultation.
- Set up a Circuit 'youth forum' as a means of developing mission to young people and gathering their thoughts about the best configuration for the Circuit.
- Respond to questions from across the Circuit with cross Circuit 'Question and Answer' session(s) held on appropriate site(s) once we are allowed to meet together.

Proposed timeline



There will be further opportunities for everyone to participate in this on-going process.

Meanwhile, huge thanks from the CLT to everyone who responded in any way to the issues, information and suggestions in 'Casting the Net on the Other Side.'

We ask that you continue to pray for guidance & discernment as we – together – seek to Reimagine the Circuit.