

## National Forest East Methodist Circuit

# NFE Circuit Mission Plan – Revised Spring 2024

## 1. Introduction and background

### A. The challenge

The membership of churches in the National Forest East Circuit has been in decline since its inception and followed a long slow, but steady decline of its two parent circuits. This reflects a national decline in church membership across all the established, traditional denominations.

The pandemic and consequent lockdowns resulted in the closure of several of our smaller churches, but this probably only speeded up a process that was inevitable - as members grew old together. If there was any positive from these closures and resultant building sales, it has provided significant funds that can be made available for mission work in the remaining churches.

For the NFE Methodist Churches, there are significant practical challenges in terms of full-time staffing, local church administration, the maintenance of facilities and the prudent planning for a continued decline, should these trends continue. More so, however, it is our responsibility to address the greater challenge of calling people in our communities to faith in Jesus, and to serving our generation with joy and hope. This Mission Plan describes how the Circuit intends to meet those challenges.

### B. The hope

*“Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it has a god who knows the way out of the grave.”* (G.K. Chesterton). Our Circuit family will face many challenges in the next few years and we will have to find new ways of using our resources to serve God, but we must move forward in confidence with a God who knows the way!

### C. The plan

This NFE Circuit Mission Plan will be completed following careful consideration of the individual mission plans of each church. We will listen to the needs and vision of the churches, and list the strategic actions which we believe the Circuit should take to help ensure that there is a thriving and witnessing Methodist presence in our area but, more importantly, that the kingdom of God is growing in our communities.

## 2. 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; Learning & Caring; Service; Evangelism.**

## 3. NFE Circuit Mission Statement

“The Circuit exists to support the NFE churches in God's mission. We are passionate about learning and growing together, celebrating the love of God, sharing the life of God with those around us and with those in need around the world and bringing our neighbours to Christ.”

## 4. NFE Circuit Vision

“A network of growing churches, characterised by clear vision, vibrant and accessible worship, discipleship, and love for one another, committed to serving and witnessing within our communities, and with strong and supportive links among ourselves and with other churches and agencies.”

## 5. NFE Aims and Objectives

**A. Plan and lead:** establish a viable and vibrant circuit of churches.

**A1.** Identify those churches which have the vision and resources to grow the kingdom in their communities.

Review, monitor and evaluate church mission plans. Help churches to carefully consider their vision and strategies and decide whether their plans and ideas are realistic within the available resources.

Work with church councils to enable them to make firm plans for their future, whether for missional growth or for finding new ways of functioning as a Christian community.

**A2.** Come alongside churches which become unviable, and help them to merge, close or find new ways of functioning in their communities.

Work with church councils to enable them to support their members, explore what it means to be a congregation without a building, and find supportive links and resources within their neighbourhood or in other Methodist churches.

**A3.** Identify opportunities for outreach in communities which have no Christian presence, and ways of staffing and resourcing such work.

Research areas of need and opportunity; work with the Methodist Church at District and possibly national level to gain the resources for new initiatives (for example, Pioneer ministries), and invest from within the circuit where possible.

## **B. Support and equip:** work together to grow and thrive.

**B1.** Recruit, train and support ministers, staff, lay pastors, local preachers and leaders to meet the needs of churches and communities.

Establish priorities for the recruitment and allocation of paid lay staff.

Develop the Lay Pastors programme, and move towards having a Lay Pastor (or an active leadership team) in each church.

Enhance the training of Local Preachers to meet the changing needs of the churches where they serve (see below).

Encourage the development of leaders of weekday House/Home Bible Study Groups

Encourage church councils to understand and enhance their leadership role in the churches. Support and encourage ministers and staff through these changes.

**B2.** Build a mutually supportive network of churches; promote joint working and the sharing of ideas and expertise between churches in the various groups, across the circuit and across denominations.

Develop closer working links between churches, and with other churches in our communities, particularly as questions of viability are being addressed.

Identify churches which can offer leadership in the circuit in particular areas of work.

Encourage links between churches with similar needs, goals, visions, and approach. E.g. 'Best Practice Clubs'

**B3.** Enable churches to access appropriate resources, training and consultancy to achieve their goals. *See Section 6 for a discussion of the resourcing, support and training needs identified by the churches.*

## **C. Govern and administer:** organise ourselves for effectiveness.

**C1.** Ensure that all churches fulfil their governance responsibilities, for example in respect of financial accountability, property matters and safeguarding. These will always be priorities for the circuit, and we need to maintain effective controls in these areas.

**C2.** Reduce the administrative burden on ministers and church councils by the identification and adoption of new governance and trusteeship models. We understand that changes such as that between Melbourne and Weston will enable more efficient and effective governance and trusteeship, and will free up time and energy for all. Churches will need to be guided through these changes. We may also wish to consider moving towards simplifying and merging church finances where this is possible and acceptable.

**C3.** Manage the human and financial resources of the Circuit effectively: safeguard the health and well-being of ministers, paid employees and lay leaders in all the various roles across the

churches. There are existing systems for supervision and mentoring. It will be helpful to review these and seek to avoid burnout at all levels. *Some of the changes proposed will have a positive impact on ministers' and staff workload, but demands are sure to increase in other areas.*

## 6. Growing and Thriving

The most pressing need is for careful review/creation of church mission plans and dialogue with the churches about how they see their future, and what they are looking for from the circuit. This may prompt some difficult decisions about resources and viability. This will largely be in the hands of the circuit stewards and ministers.

We have asked the churches to assess their priorities in respect of the four areas of **Our Calling**. Their priorities will most likely produce a list of 'needs' which will be presented to the Circuit Leadership Team by the end of December 2024. The common themes which emerge as steps towards growing and thriving churches will be categorised and become the primary area of support from the Circuit. *Examples are provided below*

### A. Worship

#### Church priorities

1. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Offer alternative forms of worship which are more likely to meet the needs of those outside of and connected to the church who do not currently find services to be meaningful.
2. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Continue and develop online and hybrid forms of worship to serve those who are housebound, and to reach others outside the church.
3. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Be more deliberate about the form and content of services in order to meet the mission and discipleship aims of the church.

#### *How the circuit can help*

- A1: EXAMPLE ONLY** Support and enable the development of flexible and accessible worship opportunities across our churches. This could involve a range of options and activities: offering training and support to churches in opening up new forms of worship; having a few "hubs" where there are regular worship events building cross-church links for sharing worship in a range of styles and formats.
- A2: EXAMPLE ONLY** Provide technical help and advice to churches who want to expand and improve their online and hybrid services. There may be people in and around the circuit who have substantial skills and experience which could be made available to churches. We need to research who is out there, and maintain a list of those who can be called on. There is a District initiative to support IT across the circuits, which we should also tap into.
- A3. EXAMPLE ONLY** Train and equip local preachers to meet the needs and programmes of churches to which they are assigned, and encourage dialogue between churches and preachers. Several churches commented that they wished to have more interaction with LPs and prepare them to align with the church's teaching objectives and worship style. Already much thought is given to preaching appointments, but as churches look to 'open up' more to

their communities and pursue specific aims in terms of congregational growth, that may need further attention.

## B. Learning and Caring

### Church priorities

1. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Enable growth, learning and pastoral support through small groups.
2. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Ensure that older members receive a high level of pastoral care.

### *How the circuit can help*

**B1. EXAMPLE ONLY** Promote and support the development of a network of small groups. We want to enable growth in discipleship and the ideal of “everyone an evangelist” through relationships, study and prayer. Actions may include training and equipping leaders, identifying appropriate materials, and establishing some online groups for those who can’t meet physically.

**B2. EXAMPLE ONLY** Keep the pastoral care systems in each church under review, and encourage more members to be involved in caring for one another. This is something which is already happening to a high degree in most of our churches. The Circuit, in particular the ministers and lay leaders, should keep this under review as many of our pastoral visitors are coming towards the end of their ministry in this area.

## C. Service

### Church priorities

1. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Reach out to people within our communities who are lonely, isolated and suffering from mental health issues; to create places of welcome in our buildings.
2. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Build local alliances and work towards the alleviation of poverty and deprivation.

### *How the circuit can help*

**C1. EXAMPLE ONLY** Identify churches (within and outside the Circuit) which have effective programmes and make their knowledge and experience available to other churches. ***This is one of the most cited needs in the church mission plans. It would be good for the Circuit to create a mechanism for pooling ideas and supporting initiatives across churches.***

**C2. EXAMPLE ONLY** Build links with local councils, NGOs and volunteer networks across the Wirral to support the work of churches in their communities, particularly in areas of deprivation. A number of churches work closely with local agencies, and wish to expand that partnership in order to meet shared objectives. There may be opportunities to promote alliances across the Circuit.

## D. Evangelism

### Church priorities

1. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Reach out to children, families and schools.
2. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Create “gateway” activities and events and enable church members to build relationships with others in the community.
3. **EXAMPLE ONLY** Teach and equip members to share their faith – “everyone an evangelist”.

### *How the circuit can help*

- D1. EXAMPLE ONLY** Enhance and support the work of the Children and Families team. This is the most frequently cited need among the churches. There is widespread acknowledgement that this area of work is critical for the future of the church, but there is a serious lack of people and skills in the churches.
- D2. EXAMPLE ONLY** Communicate and share ideas and experiments via print, social media and meetings with churches. Evaluate national and district initiatives and consider how they can best be implemented in the NFE Circuit.
- D3. EXAMPLE ONLY** Build a shared vision across the churches through occasional special events for training, equipping and envisioning, such as a Circuit Vision events or a Circuit Awaydays. Although some report that their members have gone as far as they are likely to go in discipleship, many are ready to learn and are well aware of the need to evangelise in our communities.
- D4.** Establish at least one new community.

## 7. Responsibilities and action plans

Responsibility for carrying out this plan will lie with the CLT, engaged with ‘Tiger Teams’ drawn from volunteers across the Churches (see Section 8)

Depending on the outcome of the individual Church Reviews we will potentially **reconfigure and strengthening our Circuit Leadership Team** to reflect the aims and priorities.

Typically groupings may be

- **Worship, learning and caring**
- **Service & Evangelism**
- **Strategy, Communication, and planning**
- **Governance, Property, Finance, and Administration**

**Circuit Action Plans** will be written for each area of responsibility.

## **8. Outcomes/Measures**

The CLT will determine how the progress of the plan should be measured, and the outcomes evaluated.

## **9. Organisation**

Following the Church Mission Plan reviews and with a clearer understanding of the perceived Church 'needs' (December 2024) it is intended that the Circuit will form several 'Tiger Teams' to help deliver whatever is required.

The Tiger Teams will consist of Ministers, Circuit Stewards, Lay Workers, and Volunteers from our Churches to investigate and resolve specific issues. They will be empowered to operate at a high level, with only final solutions being brought to Circuit Meetings for approval.