

Circuits working together

Introducing Circuit Federations

What is a federation?

A federation is a group of two or more circuits working together to gain mutual benefit through the sharing of expertise, staff, volunteers or resources across a larger structure, while retaining autonomy in some or all areas.

In practice a federation is likely to consist of three neighbouring circuits which have started working together to overcome the issues that they are too small to deal with on their own. They are likely to share training, such as that provided for Local Preachers and coordinate their property and finance teams to take advantage of experts in one circuit and a shortage of volunteers in another. They have agreed to coordinate stationing decisions, and may share a minister if pressures of finance or availability of appropriate presbyters dictates. The staffs of the three circuits meet together for mutual support and to plan some joint events; when a minister is on sabbatical or ill, those from the other circuits work together to limit the impact on continuing work.

It is impossible to accurately define what makes a federation.

The underlying principle is that both the working practice, and the theory behind it, is under the control of the circuits involved: a federation is what its constituents want it to be. Circuits can delegate some activities to a federation group, such as training, while other things are simply shared to improve mutual understanding. Volunteers, such as finance officers, could help each other by sharing experience, or costs could be shared to jointly engage a Lay Employee. Perhaps the greatest advantage comes when stationing is shared across the federation.

Federations can be temporary, perhaps while coping with staff changes, or permanent because common interests make this sensible. Federations can even be transitory: specifically formed to manage the process of merging circuits gradually.

Circuits are to be open “to the energy of the Spirit” and “their development is limited only by their ability to respond to God’s call to engage in mission and ministry for God’s kingdom”. *The Missional Nature of the Circuit*

Is a larger group more effective?

Across The Methodist Church it is generally accepted that larger circuits bring advantages in effectiveness and this can equally apply to smaller circuits working together. Bigger unites can be more flexible with resources, especially ministers and Lay Employees, and can cope better with change and temporary difficulties such as when a minister is absent for any reason. Most ministers recognise the value of being part of a larger team, and churches appreciate the creativity as well as the security this brings.

These benefits are especially important when dealing with our primary purpose in God's kingdom: delivering mission. Staffing in larger teams can be much more creative as ministers can be encouraged to develop their own individual calling. For example, it becomes possible for a minister to focus almost exclusively on youth work, or for a Deacon to be appointed to provide community support and outreach, without having to compromise the existing worship pattern in the churches. The possibilities for developing the discipleship and work of ordinary church members can be even more exciting, with teams of volunteers empowered to work within their strengths rather than struggling to deal with the multitude of routine jobs required by every circuit.

Do larger structures bring problems?

Inevitably there are significant disadvantages to larger structures. Perhaps the most significant is the loss of local influence on Missional activities. A local church is, by definition, best placed to deliver local mission: it can focus on actual needs and identify an appropriate strategy. Like any organisation, as a circuit gets larger it loses its connectiveness to local issues, while at the same time dealing with many more individual priorities and the local detail can get lost.

Read Matthew 25: 14-30.

This speaks clearly to us of our duty as stewards of God's kingdom. It calls us to be proactive in this, it might even be suggesting we take risks when investing in the work of the kingdom.

Without doubt, travel can become a troublesome issue, as people are expected to travel long distances to attend meetings or to lead worship. It is possible to reduce the number of meetings needed, choose venues and times carefully or consult electronically, but wherever restructuring has been considered, increased travel remains a concern that needs to be balanced against the advantages it brings.

Why form a federation?

Federations offer a viable alternative to a full merger, bringing real benefits while protecting the local needs.

Despite the clear advantages, many circuits feel that the cost of belonging to a large circuit is too high a price to pay for what is gained; the loss of local control and sensitivity is too significant. A federation can bring many of the advantages of a larger unit but, essentially, the circuits remain autonomous. Only those elements of work that could benefit from working in a larger unit need to be shared, and even these are still subject to the individual circuit's authority. The federation is owned and controlled by its constituents: a principal known as "Subsidiarity".

Federations are much easier to create than larger circuits. Their nature can change or evolve over time, responding to changing needs and building on what is proven to work. It is also easy to dissolve a federation or to change the constituent circuits, ensuring that it need only exist as long as it is providing a useful service, and in the shape that is most useful.

Federations do not need to be formed on a strict geographical basis, but could link circuits that have a common interest or style. It is also possible for a circuit to belong to more than one federative group, or for a single church to work in a federation that does not involve the rest of its circuit.

Is it just making things more complex?

Is this yet more meetings?

The way a federation works is determined by its constituent members, who can decide how many meetings and activities it undertakes. In many cases it will not need any extra time: a shared meeting does not take longer than a separate meeting, but may be more productive. Relationships with the District, and other such bodies, need not be affected since the circuit remains the primary point of contact, however the constituents might prefer to coordinate this through the federation.

It is inevitable that there will be some additional work generated when such a group is set up, but this need only be for a short time. *One should hope that a significant amount of additional work and effort is required as a result of the invigorated mission that follows: things could get busy!*

What matters is mission: anything we change must be to enable our mission to be more effective, and things that get in the way of mission *should* be changed.

How do we start the process?

Pray. Seek assurance as well as guidance, while keeping the focus on the calling of God's people in your area.

Ask. Seek advice from your District Development Enabler and other District Officers on the best way to develop your relationship with other circuits. They should be able to offer you more information, and may be able to work with you in developing a way forward.

Talk. Meet with the other circuits, informally and formally. Invite them to events, especially when concerned with vision or planning for the future. Make sure things are as open and friendly as possible, and don't forget that circuits are social units as well as organisational: meeting over a meal can be really useful.

Vision. Identify how mission could develop within the wider group. A vision event or a Circuit Review can be helpful, perhaps run jointly with your neighbours.

Negotiate. Decide what elements could be shared initially, and what needs to be kept separate.

Agree. Draw up a simple Compact to guide the relationships, and offer it to the District for recognition. Keep it short and flexible: it's not a constitution!

Celebrate. Gather together somewhere big and mark the start of your journey together with an act of worship.

Build. Get on with working for the kingdom, using the best of the gifts that you can all offer together.

Your District Development Enabler has a significant role to play in helping The Methodist Church restructure to enable mission to be more effective. They can be helpful in making initial contact with potential partners, or identifying those that have needs that relate to you own. Many circuits feel that an external facilitator helps this process significantly, and the DDE may be able to work closely with you through the process, or identify others who could support you according to your needs.

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