

# For Such A Time As This progress update

## September 2023

### Introduction

We are now halfway through the timespan allocated to our strategy for resourcing mission, albeit through a far longer period of pandemic lockdowns than expected, followed by a cost of living crisis and a time when the age profile of several congregations has enforced changes on circuits. Recent updates to DLT have provided information about what activity has been undertaken. This report recaps what has been done before and sets out proposals for discussion for where we will focus efforts on implementing our strategy over the coming year.

This progress update includes more by way of qualitative aspirations than has been usual when discussing our district strategy for resourcing mission, and more generally in the life of our churches. This is deliberate.

These are not included to place any obligation on any circuit church or person. Nor are they intended to create a slavish target-adherence culture are the expense of evolving and qualitative priorities. Instead they are an estimate of our capacity to provide support, and indicators of where our original strategic consultations and more recent conversations suggest concentrated effort will have a positive effect.

The second phrase that 'gets my goat' is

**'I am not into the numbers game.'**


**In my experience this is a bit of a bishop's phrase. I wish the exact opposite were true, as it clearly was for Jesus. He is always counting, not numbers, but numbers of people. Ten lepers, a hundred and twenty companions, five thousand hungry people, twelve disciples. He counts them all because they all count.**

Whilst a more detailed scriptural analysis could be added to this quote from Robin Gamble of Leading Your Church into Growth, there is no shortage of measurable accountability within Old & New Testaments, our Methodist heritage and contemporary missional thinkers such as Sam Wells and George Lings.

As ever, the primary role of the district is to facilitating learning, changing and joining in necessary for the fruitfulness of our members, who are at the coalface of our mission. Much of the focus for the coming year will be on supporting relatively small numbers of churches or people to develop an aspect of their current expertise. From this knowledge and learning can then be shared from church to church.

### Using this document

I suggest that we focus discussion at September DLT on growing disciples, transforming mission and properties fit for mission. With passionate contextual worship, sharing stories and passionate contextual worship discussed in November.

Feel free to get in touch with me outside of DLT meetings to discuss any aspect of this document.

## **Key progress**

- Internal communications element of sharing stories is gaining traction through a range of media
- Networks and support structures are starting to provide tangible support for some
- Significant progress is being made in new Christian communities
- Some bold and complex uses of property assets are being developed
- Plans have been implemented for new ways of equipping leaders, e.g. One Programme District and pooled WLP training

## **New paths needed**

- Personal/ small group discipleship practices underpin all of our mission, are highly localised, and affected by changes in individual circumstances. Anything more we can bring to bear to support and encourage these will increase the impact of all else we seek to do
- Digital/ hybrid presence has unsurprisingly stagnated since its blooming during lockdown, but our society is not becoming less digital
- The training landscape has changed significantly since this aspect of our strategy was developed, and has to some extent been dominated by new mandatory training
- Whilst communication paths within the district have improved, there are still many people unaware of resources which could be of direct local benefit
- The wording of our strategic objectives predated Connexionally led refocussing on what it means to be a justice-seeking church, and are not as explicit about this as they likely would be if written today.

## GROWING DISCIPLES for such a time as this

Foster restored culture of high-quality small group and personal discipleship *vocation and mission flows from personal relationship with Christ*

Planned actions	Status
Support circuits/ churches in strengthening/ establishing new discipleship groups. Facilitate ready access to high quality resources.	Some progress
Model discipleship accountability practices in district meetings	Some progress
Encourage all district officers to be active participants in a discipleship group	Not yet started

Aim by 2025: Increasing numbers of people engaging in discipleship groups

Progress to date:

- Original launch of Methodist Way of Life failed to achieve sustained traction, but has subsequently been reworked
- Some other local experimentation with new forms of discipleship groups during the disruption of the COVID pandemic
- Holy Habits programme in Barnsley has demonstrated effectiveness of focussed reflecting on discipleship
- Susanna Wesley Foundation backed lay leadership research project led by Erica Dunmow has shown early promise, albeit resource intensive

Target for 2023/24:

- Support three churches to concentrate on a “discipleship first/ discipleship pathway” model over a prolonged period
- Encourage (not compel!) all district officers and staff to be active participants in a supportive discipleship group in whatever form works for them, starting new groups if necessary

Nurture leaders *realising visions not filling roles*

Planned actions	Status
Provide mentor support, networks and learning opportunities for new and established local leaders of all ages – members and staff – to grow in knowledge and skills, and visions rekindled.	Some progress
Encourage a permission-giving culture that takes holy risks.	Some progress

Aim by 2025: Visibly growing leaders

Progress to date:

- One Programme District internships launched, three interns for 2023/24
- Peak CLT participated in Transformational Leadership Learning Community
- Active communities of practice for justice seekers, children & youth workers. Networks such as these are valued by those who engage, but it has been hard to spread news of them

- Ministry with older people initially valuable during COVID but ended due to lack of leadership

Target for 2023/24:

- Seven One Programme District interns signed up for 2024/25
- Noting that regional lay workers retreat is valued by significant numbers of workers from other districts who attend, but not known to most workers in our district, increase attendance from our district to eight people and seek feedback
- Trial BUPA Employee Assistance Programme for district staff, with potential to roll out to interested circuit & church employers if shown to be valuable

**Equip disciples to serve through local learning *equipping to meet contextual needs***

Planned actions	Status
Ensuring circuits and churches have access to locally based development/ learning materials to meet missional needs they identify – through signposting existing high-quality resources, or creating new resources where required	Some progress
Develop new ways of working with our Learning Network to resource this	Not started
Provide grants to enable lay and ordained people to access learning and development opportunities	Gone backwards

Original aim by 2025: Increased demand for learning & development grants

Progress to date:

- Training grants and MDR grants stopped due to lack of applications & budgetary pressures. Possibly due to training fatigue, significant catch up required in mandatory training (EDI, Safeguarding) high general workload of staff and volunteers. Although there is now more free high quality training available.
- Learning Network has been restructured into a North East region with emphasis on nationally developed resources - not clear what impact this will have on local engagement
- But significant numbers of people have engaged with training offered, e.g. pioneer training, Mental Health First Aid and Chaplaincy Everywhere
- Justice Seekers community of practice launched. A committed core and regular sharing of information, but too early to tell long term impact

Proposed new aim by 2025: recent positive experience of learning in most congregations

Target for 2023/24:

- Support all circuits to be fully up to date with EDI and Safeguarding training in ways which work for them, and share stories of positive missional impact of this learning
- Pilot Youth Essentials training course – ten local participants.
- Explore other options for encouraging and validating continuing personal development for children & youth leaders
- Hold district worship to celebrate and affirm children & youth leaders (no ordinands testimony service this year)

## PASSIONATE CONTEXTUAL WORSHIP for such a time as this

Share best practice *our acts of worship must always be occasions when congregations expect to encounter the presence of God*

Planned actions	Status
Use District gatherings to be occasions celebrating God's presence. Provide infrequent large inspirational worship celebrations for adults and young people.	On track
Support circuits in fostering cultures that actively anticipate and confidently promote public worship.	Not started
Create opportunities for people with particular expertise to support circuits and churches in developing their worship, and in developing a culture of excellence and continual learning amongst those responsible for leading worship.	Some progress
Initiate conversations about resources needed to enhance worship which are not locally known of or available, and ensure that these are easily accessible.	Not started

Target for 2025: Increased participation in District celebrations. Stories of increased engagement in worship from congregations supported

Progress to date:

- District youth day relaunched, attendance growing year on year. Attendance at 3Generate grown to 102
- Attendance at District Gathering increased to 109 (including 40 non synod members)
- District-wide team of Worship Leading & Preaching tutors formed (benefits trainees and tutors)

Target for 2024/25:

- Continue to grow attendance at District Youth Day and 3Generate
- Increasing awareness of WLP training and tell stories of new worship leaders & local preachers. Eight people starting WLP training
- In partnership with circuits, research "local arrangement" worship across the district, and what would assist those leading

Online worship keeps growing *lockdown becomes the start of an era of complementary dispersed and gathered worship*

Planned actions	Status
Create a team advising on and producing high quality impactful online worship resources with a contextually local flavour.	Not started
Support and advise churches and circuits as they explore and create new sustainable blends of inclusive contextually relevant online/ remote and gathered worship.	Some progress

Target for 2025: Growth in people engaging with online and blended worship.

Progress to date:

- Some streamed/ hybrid worship has continued post lockdown, e.g. Barnsley streamed weekly circuit worship. Online broadcast devotions in Derbyshire North East. But much of what had been started has now stopped, often due to time pressures
- Consultations held with people involved in digital/ hybrid worship, suggesting that levels of lockdown experimentation are now significantly reduced, with worship accessible online having settled into fixed patterns, primarily with time to research & experiment as the limiting factor
- Some primarily digital targeted experimentation is continuing e.g. Metal Methodist

Target for 2023/24:

- Explore high quality district-led regular online (video or podcast) devotional or conversational broadcast that supports engagement with existing local churches, accessible through a range of platforms (this was previously discussed in September, but at that time it was felt better to direct people towards more extensive circuit online output which existed at that time). Use learnings from this to advise churches/ circuits to take next steps with their own complementary digital content.
- Explore possibility of a primarily digital expression of church for new people with a distinctive local flavour. Use learnings from this to advise churches/ circuits.
- Subject to time available, support three worshipping communities to take significant steps forward in digital/hybrid worship

## SHARING STORIES for such a time as this

Make testimony normal *noticing God moving in our lives*

Planned actions	Status
Model use of testimony in all District meetings	Some progress
Support & encourage recognised leaders to model and invite regular testimony	Not started
Provide support and advice for circuits/churches seeking to increase use of testimony	Some progress

Target for 2025: Increased regular use of testimony amongst members and churches

Progress to date:

- Prepared testimony routinely included in District Gathering
- Spring 2022 District Gathering on testimony in worship

Target for 2023/24:

- Support five churches in undertaking year of testimony or similar & measure impact
- Extend including testimony each time as part of planning for other district meetings/ events

Share stories *recognising God acting in our societies*

Planned actions	Status
Promote stories of God at work regularly via District social media, email, printed resources. Recognising a gospel of hope, including from vulnerability and lament	On track
District officers/ leaders to model inspiring communication	Some progress

Target for 2025: Increasing levels of interaction with District social media and regular emailed communications

Progress to date:

- District magazine launched – circulation up from 1,750 to 2,750
- Professional videos of new Christian communities
- Facebook engagement continues to grow: 10% increase in followers and 22% increase in reach for 2022/23
- Instagram grew initially, but 35% reduction in reach for 2022/23 – we need to develop ways of framing content more tailored to this platform
- Website well used – average 1,044 monthly visits
- Average opening of weekly news email increased to 328

Target for 2023/24:

- Set & implement annual communications plan, reflecting missional targets & priorities for the year
- Continuing to increase impact of story telling via social media: 10% increase in reach for both Facebook & Instagram
- average opening of weekly news email increased further 10% (including announcements, but always opening with a story from these priorities)

**Make communication easy *celebrating God present in our communities***

Planned actions	Status
Provide website and social media support where helpful to circuits/ churches	Some progress
Provide communications/ media advice for circuits & churches, that they might be better equipped to know, be known by, and speak into, their communities	Some progress

Target for 2025: Increased interaction with church & circuit social media. Sufficient good quality information about all churches readily available online

Progress to date:

- District website and six circuit websites refreshed
- Circuit social media – six circuits have social media profile, with varying levels of activity
- Church social media – many have their own local presence, albeit many less active than under lockdown

Target for 2023/24

- Media training for six individuals
- Remaining circuit website refreshed
- Offer of social media audit for all circuits
- Start community of practice for people with responsibility for church/ circuit communications/ social media
- Subject to time available, in depth online presence review & upskilling for five churches – enabling highly accessible, engaging and responsive presence in their digital neighbourhoods

**Creating a culture of invitation to relationship with Christ *trusting God speaks into the hearts of our neighbours***

Planned actions	Status
Support & encourage circuits/churches seeking to create a culture of invitation, getting beyond social activities to faith exploration.	Not started
With permission and care, celebrate stories of new relationships with Christ	Not started

Target for 2025: More churches creating explicit opportunities for exploring Christian faith

Progress to date:

- Not yet a significant area of focus, having deliberately started with testimony within the faith community
- Numbers of confirmations are starting to recover post covid, albeit concentrated in a minority of churches

Target for 2023/24

- “Stepping Out” is focus of September 2023 District Gathering – seek post event feedback and implementation support
- Support three churches to start developing active discipleship exploration pathways



## TRANSFORMING MISSION for such a time as this

Encourage new innovative mission *Our world is ever-changing and our need for God eternal*

Planned actions	Status
Encourage circuits and churches to experiment with regular new outreach experiments, including through advice, networking, sharing best practice and funding (subject to availability).	Some progress

Target for 2025: Trialling new ways of connecting becomes increasingly normal. Stories of successful ideas shared

Progress to date:

- 4 transforming mission grants
- 41 warm space grants awarded in response to cost of living crisis, feedback shared. A clear and relevant focus linked to a national conversation helped encourage local initiatives, the majority of which are continuing.
- Significant project management support provided for launch of Peak Wesley Way

Target for 2023/24:

- Support and encourage development of continuing warm spaces (expected approx. 30) – the cost of living crisis continues
- At the current time there does not seem to be rational for a new programme analogous to warm spaces. We should be ready to respond to such if it emerges

Encourage and equip innovators breaking new ground *Joining in with moves of the Spirit*

Planned actions	Status
With churches and circuits, identify projects and local leaders with potential to create or develop spaces for new people/ fresh expressions – places of welcome, conversion and discipleship.	On track
Provide sustained mentoring, training and support for local members reaching out through intentional mission. Facilitate networking opportunities/ communities of practice for local people engaged in such projects.	On track
Encourage permission giving, risk-taking, allowing time for projects to succeed and appropriate measures of success.	Some progress
Recognise and promote the value of successful and failed experiments, and ensure that learnings from both are shared widely across the District.	Some progress
Support churches & circuits in finding ways to release innovators and pioneers to concentrate on growing flourishing fresh expressions from projects with potential.	Some progress
Subject to funding available, provide financial support to new missional initiatives where necessary.	On track

Target to 2025: Increasing number of innovative forms of church visibly growing in depth and reach. Supportive and accessible networks of innovators/ pioneers.

Progress to date:

- District NPNP Pilot and first circuit-led NPNP (Rossington) launched with Connexional NPNP support, plus at least 11 other active new Christian communities outside of this programme
- 10 people from our district attended residential pioneer training at Cliff College
- Initial pioneer teams gathering held, attended by 17 people
- We have focussed on stories of flourishing, but not yet so much on stories of “not as we initially hoped” experiences

Target for 2023/24:

- 6 further potential circuit-led NPNP’s being actively considered
- Increasing numbers of people engaging with networking & support for pioneer teams

Ask searching questions *Fruitfulness comes from both pruning and watering*

Embrace change *Resurrection hope flows from believing in endings*

Planned actions	Status
Provide expert teams to review missional projects with circuits: understanding impact, potential, challenges and required changes. (Responsibility for ongoing support of work in marginal communities which cannot sustain itself lies with circuits.)	Some progress
Support circuits and churches where requested in exploring early whether the mission of a church might be drawing to a close or needing to change significantly.	Some progress
Support circuits in achieving good endings in circumstances where the mission of a congregation or chapel is reaching its conclusion or transitioning to a substantially different new chapter.	Some progress

Target for 2025: Recommendations from circuits/ churches who have benefitted from district-led reviews/ transitions

Progress to date:

- Occasional involvement of people from beyond circuit in reviews and endings, which has generally been positively received, but often circuits have chosen to do this in-house

Target for 2023/24:

- Respond to requests for involvement

**Set plans for mission** *Discerning and following where God is calling us to journey next*

Planned actions	Status
Assist circuits/ churches in identifying, recording and setting paths to implement bespoke plans for missional action, arising from their context and gifts.	Some progress
Assist circuits in identifying and responding to opportunities for new Christian communities.	Some progress

Target for 2025: Increased sense of purposefulness from established churches. Healthy new Christian communities

Progress to date:

- All circuits have/ working towards a staffing/ resourcing plan, majority with clearly identified missional priorities
- New Christian community visions to date have often been locally led rather than inherent to circuit strategy, but awareness is increasing
- Mission planning at church level has often been adversely impacted by post pandemic fatigue and uncertainty

Target for 2023/24:

- Support remaining circuits in naming and communicating missional priorities
- Offer simple reviews of effectiveness of implementation of existing circuit mission plans
- Promote existing mission planning tools and share tools for simple community consultation exercises
- Offer church mission review and sustained post review implementation support for five churches
- Over the course of the year work towards churches being consistently and meaningfully able to meet existing requirements to have a living mission plan when applying for grants and property consents (S.O.932)

## PROPERTIES FIT FOR MISSION for such a time as this

Property support for local trustees *missional opportunities may arise in societies without relevant property expertise*

Planned actions	Status
Provide increased support and advice to local trustees regarding property management and improvement where needed.	On track
Provide support and advice on quality of facilities necessary for contemporary mission and practical impactful steps required to reach these standards.	Not started
Subject to availability of funding, provide grant support towards capital costs needed for premises to respond to identified transformative missional opportunities.	On track
Support churches/ circuits in exploring and developing innovative models of property management and development, or partnerships with other providers of local public spaces, in response to missional needs and bringing to bear property expertise from across the District.	Some progress

Aim by 2025: Practical improvements being made to premises with missional potential but inadequate facilities.

Progress to date:

- 6 property grants
- Some new innovative new ways of using property assets being developed

Target for 2023/24:

- Support one circuit in plans for significant new property management model
- Support every circuit to have its own documented property strategy and action plan
- With Learning Network, make available fresh property management training

Reduce our carbon footprint *being good stewards of creation*

Planned actions	Status
Support projects improving carbon footprint of Methodist churches. Provide advice on practical and efficient ways of achieving this.	Some progress
Advocate for good stewardship of creation through management of Methodist properties.	Some progress

Aim by 2025: Implementation of carbon efficiency measures across properties within the District.

Progress to date:

- 7 Bronze, 3 Silver Eco Churches
- 13 bespoke energy efficiency surveys under match funding scheme

Target for 2023/24

- Conversation with each circuit about how to support them in promoting Eco Church appropriate for their context, leading to a further 5 registered Eco Churches across the district
- Further 15 energy efficiency surveys, with half of 2022/23 recipients having acted on some recommendations
- Begin exploring practical alternatives to gas boilers

## SIMPLIFYING PROCEDURES for such a time as this

*Releasing time and energy for sharing stories, passionate contextual worship and transforming mission*

Our aim	What we will do
Challenge inefficiency	Be alert to opportunities to simplify cumbersome administration or remove unnecessary tasks from local officers, ministers and lay staff  Where relevant, represent strongly the impacts of poorly conceived external regulation/ procedures on our members/ staff  Foster a culture where constructive feedback is willingly offered and gratefully received
Easily accessible information	Refresh District website, making information clearly presented and easy to find  Review and evolve regular District communications, so that appropriate information is communicated to relevant people in helpful formats
Easy to use templates	Provide easily accessible templates/ examples for procedures/ documents repeated across our churches, through District website, or providing clear references to where information is already available elsewhere
Centralise where helpful	Be alert to opportunities to lift administrative burdens from local officers, ministers and lay staff, and for opportunities to share or consolidate roles, where efficient and effective to do so
Share good practice	Create opportunities for sharing good practice, communities of practice and mentoring amongst officers and staff with governance roles
Address bottlenecks	Be alert to and prioritise support for individuals or roles burdened with unrealistic volumes of administration or information to relay
<b>What we expect to see by 2025</b>	
Noticeable and identifiable improvements in procedures each year  Feedback on the District's own procedures responded to promptly  Awareness of procedures to be simplified over the coming year	

Progress to date:

- Appointment of HR Officer enabling lifting of most recruitment administration from line managers (when utilised)
- District database extended to include key church & circuit officers, reducing reliance on ministers to forward on routine communications - point of contact other than minister/ lay pastor in place for 85% of chapels
- Worked with TMCP to simplify GDPR self-audits – completion increased to 94%
- Simplified annual safeguarding audit – completion increased to 69%
- Three circuits have remodelled operational support roles to reduce administrative burdens on presbyters

Target for 2024/25:

- Staff handbook and full suite of employment policies implemented for district staff and available for roll out to circuits & churches (diffuses employment disputes)
- Work with Connexional Team to:
  - make DBS exemptions for less active supernumeraries less cumbersome and more pastorally sensitive
  - simplify annual property checklists
- Work with circuit property stewards/ equivalents so that potential queries/ concerns about property project consents are consistently identified and addressed early in the planning process