



Background:

Churches are closing. This is a simple fact. The reasons vary, but often depleted numbers, the lack of office holders, financial or property crises, lack of intentional mission and discipleship, or an inability to recover from the impact of covid are leading factors. What is unclear, often, is whether a lack of faith, or a loss of calling is a factor, or if it is just the strain of trying to keep going that brings a church's life to an end. We need to discern if God is calling only on the congregation to cease to meet, or if God's calls people to inhabit the place differently. The genuine pastoral dilemma can be that the congregation has become too weary to consider these questions as well as they would like to, and we therefore need to examine them from a different perspective. It is more reasonable to consider such moments in a church's life through the lens of the circuit (the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help¹) as it responds to God's call in different ways in different places.

It is a requirement of the Standing Orders that the Synod give permission for societies to cease to meet, and for church buildings to close. It does so only after the request of the Church Council and the approval of the respective Circuit Meeting has been considered by the District Policy Committee (DPC). Previously in the District, to assist the DPC in its role it had a formal policy in place asking churches to examine their decision to request closure through a series of questions. This policy was suspended in 2022 to give space to reconsidering how we might best respond to the requests we were receiving, often from churches that had already come to the mind that they had ended. It became clear, in conversation with Superintendents, that it was often pastorally insensitive to ask churches to address the questions, or simply far too late for them to have meaning.

As we face increasing requests from societies to cease to meet, it is important that the District considers what role it can play in equipping churches and circuits facing such questions. It is for the District to enable circuits to consider whether churches are closing in the wrong places, leaving communities spiritually deprived and missionally abandoned, and to assist in the **inspiring, equipping and resourcing** of circuits to respond in those places God is calling them to new or continuing worship, service, and mission.

The District believes that several strategies might need to be deployed for different churches in different seasons of life.

When closure is requested:

For those churches that have already reached a place where they feel their mission and ministry is ending, there will be an invitation for the Circuit to reflect on this. The District believes that to fulfil its purpose, it requires Circuits to prayerfully complete the "Our Calling in this Place" report, to aid their discernment and that of the DPC. The report "Our Calling in this Place" must be submitted by the circuit's leadership team of any circuit as part of the request for a society to cease to meet to give assurance that the request comes through prayerful discernment. It will also allow the DPC to work with Circuit to support what might come next for members and for a community.

The completion of the form is not the end of the process. Where appropriate, the District will offer support to the circuit to take the next steps; for example, this maybe in relation to the building through the Missional Property Enabler or developing intentional mission and discipleship through the Mission Enabler.

¹ Standing Order 500

When support is needed:

For those churches who are asking questions about their future, or recognise that closure is evitable but is not immediate, the District is, in partnership with circuits, able to offer support to equip mission and ministry for the next or final season (however long that might be) of a church's life.

This support will be offered in different ways to different contexts but will include reflection on the question 'what is our calling in this place'. The support maybe about deepening discipleship through *A Methodist Way of Life*, using the 'Our Church's Future Story' resource, considering alternative uses for buildings, mission planning and encouragement.

If you have a church or circuit who would value this support please contact the District Chair.

When A New Place for New People (NPNP) is needed:

Two of the priorities in the **equipping** strand of the district strategy are:

- Participating in the connexional funding programme for NPNP and Church at the Margins.
- Encouraging Pioneering mission which includes evangelism in different ways, primarily but not exclusively through the Methodist Pioneer Pathway.

As a district we recognise that there are some places where the best approach will be to pioneer a NPNP instead of seeking to develop the existing society, in some places it will be right for a NPNP to develop alongside an existing society.

Many of the NPNPs in the district will develop and be funded organically within circuits, others will be funded through the connexional funding programme for NPNPs. All of the NPNPs and the pioneers involved with them will be supported in the District through the Methodist Pioneer Pathway and a peer support group.

If you feel your next step in responding to 'our calling in this place' is the development of a NPNP please contact the District Chair and/or Mission Enabler to share together about this and discover how the District can support you in your NPNP.

Conclusion:

These three strategies do not cover all eventualities or situations but hopefully cover the most common around the District. If your situation doesn't 'fit' in any of the above please contact the District Chair who will discuss with you the support you would find helpful.

The Yorkshire West Methodist District is part of the Methodist Church in Great Britain and exists to **inspire, equip and resource** the circuits and churches of the District to support them in living out the calling of the Methodist Church to respond to the Gospel of God's love in Christ.

Through this working in partnership we seek, with God's help, to be a **growing, evangelistic, justice seeking, inclusive and safe, church** living out its discipleship and mission.

Our Calling in this Place?

On completion, this form should be submitted to the DPC, via admin@ywmethodist.org.uk.

Circuit Name:		
Church Name and Address:		
Please share the story of this church and how it has served God?		
How has the mission of this church changed, and why does the church believe that God is calling them to close?		
If this church closes, what remaining Christian presence and/or mission will there be in this place?		
What concerns does this create for you as the circuit?		
As the circuit (or as a CLT), what do you believe God is saying to the Methodist Church about its calling in this place?		
Considering what you have written above, what responses are you being explored?		
Who have you approached, or will you be approaching, for further conversation on this?		
Mission Enabler <input type="checkbox"/>	Learning Network <input type="checkbox"/>	District Chair <input type="checkbox"/>
Evangelism and Growth Team <input type="checkbox"/>	Community Group(s) <input type="checkbox"/>	Other (give details) <input type="checkbox"/>
At this point, what purpose do you discern the building might have?		
Who have you approached, or will you be approaching, for further conversation on this?		
Missional Property Enabler <input type="checkbox"/>	Mission Enabler <input type="checkbox"/>	Learning Network <input type="checkbox"/>
Evangelism and Growth Team <input type="checkbox"/>	Other (give details) <input type="checkbox"/>	

What steps are being taken to accompany the members of this church as they consider closing?

Do these responses include?

MWoL Fellowship Group Meeting in a new/alternative venue

Membership Transfer Other (give details)

What other reflections would you like to share at this time?

What support would you value from the District at this time as you take the next steps in this place?

Name:

Signed:

Circuit Steward/Minister (*delete as appropriate*)

Date: