

Deaneries and Circuits

Partners in Mission

A briefing note by John Cole, National Adviser (Unity in Mission) for the Church of England – and member of the Joint Implementation Commission for the Anglican-Methodist Covenant

Foreword

by the Co-Chairs of the Joint Implementation Commission for the Anglican-Methodist Covenant

The potential for collaboration between deaneries and circuits was one of the key lessons learned from a series of workshops that were staged across England during 2006, which explored how an Anglican-Methodist Covenant can be implemented locally.

This booklet is not an official publication either of the two Churches or of the Joint Implementation Commission that was set up to develop the Covenant.

However, John Cole's text offers fresh insights into how we can each learn to think from within the other's mindset, and provides practical suggestions for how we can draw on each other's strengths and resources in our common service of God's mission.

We commend it warmly.

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Introduction

Deaneries in the Church of England and Circuits in the Methodist Church of Great Britain are superficially similar, yet deceptively different. In both Churches they provide the unit of association larger than local churches and parishes, but smaller than dioceses or districts.

Deaneries and circuits vary greatly in size – whether measured by the number of congregations or by the number of paid staff or by geographical area. At one extreme, a few large city centre and inner city Methodist churches are ‘circuits’ in their own right. At the opposite extreme, a small team of deanery clergy may be exercising ministry in up to fifty parishes.

Since an Anglican-Methodist Covenant was signed between our two Churches in November 2003, many observers have commented on the mission potential of deaneries and circuits learning to work more closely together. Across the country, however, less than a score of examples have been identified. Despite years of inter-denominational goodwill, most deaneries and circuits – and the churches within them – continue to inhabit parallel universes.

The booklet challenges deaneries to think like circuits, and circuits to think like deaneries. Out of this creative exchange new initiatives are likely to emerge and things not possible separately will become possible together.

Thinking like a circuit

In a rural area, the deanery and the circuit together contained more than fifty small churches. How could they all have regular Sunday worship including Holy Communion? The solution was a “circuit plan” that included the Anglican churches as well! All the necessary permissions for Methodist ministers to take communion services (according to Methodist discipline) in parish churches were carefully worked out under Canon B43.

A: Appreciating the differences

The Deanery

A number of precisely-defined geographical areas (parishes and benefices)

Clergy have autonomy (“freehold”) within their parishes/benefices. Responsibility rests with them, and their Parochial Church Councils, under their diocesan bishop

The Rural/Area Dean has limited powers of ‘visitation’ in parishes on behalf of the bishop and archdeacon

The Circuit

The primary unit of mission made up of a number of congregations

Ministers are a team within the circuit, each usually exercising pastoral charge with a group of congregations in a section of the circuit, but expecting to work and conduct worship in other sections from time to time.

The Superintendent minister exercises a personal ‘episcopate’ within the circuit and is responsible to Conference for all aspects of its mission

The representatives of the parishes on the Deanery Synod may, in some dioceses, be given responsibilities for resource allocation and the deployment of paid ministers

The Deanery Synod is the electoral college for the Diocesan and General Synods. Clergy and lay people vote in separate 'Houses'.

The Circuit Stewards share a collegial and communal 'episcopate' with the Superintendent and other ministers, and with the Circuit Meeting, together carrying responsibility for the life, ministry and mission of the congregations.

Circuits elect lay representatives to the District Synod – attended by all active ministers. Synod elects to the Methodist Conference where final decisions are taken on church-wide matters. The circuit takes financial decisions re the costs of ministry with money raised by a compulsory assessment on churches.

Two differences of structure

DIFFERENCE ONE In our two Churches, power and responsibility lie in different places and are handled in different ways.

In the Church of England (at least in theory) responsibility lies personally with the *parish incumbent* and the *diocesan bishop* – acting synodically, of course!

Methodists visualise power and responsibility being handled corporately, in the Methodist *Conference* and in the *circuit* – although John Wesley himself recognised the 'episcopal' role exercised by his superintendent ministers.

Those in leadership roles in each Church should not be surprised at finding no one equivalent to themselves to talk to – or when they think they do, finding that the other person wants to share very different concerns.

DIFFERENCE TWO Our two Churches have a very different ‘take’ on boundaries:

- The Church of England (at least in theory) is committed geographically – although clearly in practice many urban churches gather their congregations from far and wide.
- Methodists recognise a missionary responsibility to those around them but tend not to pay much attention, for example, to circuit ‘boundaries’.

Those in leadership in the Church of England should be careful not to force Methodists to be constrained by Church of England boundaries. Methodists, however, will sometimes benefit from thinking in more ‘geographical’ terms.

Thinking like a Deanery

When a deanery and two circuits plotted their local churches on a map, they were shocked to see that God had placed them side by side in almost twenty locations across the same area.

Along with congregations from other traditions in those locations, they realised their common vocation was to provide a “single Christian presence” in each location – something which they then discovered could take many forms according to local circumstances.

Two differences of style and priority

DIFFERENCE THREE A Rural Dean and a Methodist Superintendent, when invited to describe their role, reveal marked differences in responsibilities and concerns:

Thinking like a Rural Dean

The range of tasks

- Chair Chapter meetings
- Sooth clergy egos
- Attend to vacant parishes and ensure service cover
- Deal with queries and grumbles from clergy and laity (the latter mainly about the clergy!)
- Meet with Deanery Lay Chair for planning, prayer and envisioning
- Chair the Deanery Synod jointly with the Lay Chairperson
- Oversee Deanery budget and Share payment

Biggest concerns

Clergy who “don’t pull their weight” or fail to adapt to new roles

Thinking like a Superintendent

The range of tasks

- Chair Circuit Meeting
- Oversee the Preachers’ Meeting
- Write the Plan for all future acts of worship (in consultation – normally quarterly)
- Liaise with the Circuit Leadership team over Circuit mission and development.
- Supervise Probationers and work with those exploring vocations.
- Hold regular (compulsory) staff meetings
- Conduct worship in all the circuit churches
- Support colleagues
- Has right to chair all meetings in the churches of the Circuit (delegating as appropriate)

Biggest concerns

- Encouraging others to catch the vision for the changing mission of the church
- Finding preachers to lead worship

It is noticeable that, unlike the Superintendent, the Rural Dean is primarily concerned with the (largely autonomous) clergy and with parishes where there is a clergy vacancy.

The more strategic issues only become prominent when they have been specifically devolved by the diocese – and many deaneries are likely still to be struggling to come to terms with these new responsibilities.

DIFFERENCE FOUR

The typical agenda of business meetings reflects a comparable difference of emphasis:

The Deanery Synod

1. Reports from Diocesan and General Synods
2. Anything devolved from the diocese - e.g. 'share' allocation, pastoral planning, training and mission
3. Any issues brought from a Parochial Church Council.
4. Resolutions to Diocesan Synod
5. Invited speaker from diocese or elsewhere

The Circuit Meeting

1. Reports from Synod and Conference - sometimes to respond with an opinion.
2. A presentation on the work, life and mission of the circuit or individual churches at the start of business
3. Recommendations and reports from Circuit Committees (Preachers, finance, property etc)
4. Decisions on major developments in any church. (Other approvals needed re major property developments)
5. "Memorials" – by which issues are presented direct to Conference
6. Management of the Circuit Advance Fund (subject to Connexional approval)
7. Conversation on the work of God

This suggests that, unlike the circuit (with its direct responsibility for staffing issues, Local Preacher training, joint finances etc), the deanery primarily functions as the venue for receiving information and instruction from the wider Church of England – mainly the diocese – or for raising issues with the diocese. Deanery-wide initiatives are usually only possible when autonomous parish clergy volunteer to collaborate.

B: Discerning the possibilities

The contrasting snapshots in the last two pages may be typical but they are not final! If deaneries and circuits are to develop as effective partners in mission, those responsible in each will need to make themselves aware of how the other is changing.

Both Churches are engaged in a continual process of re-organisation, largely because of having fewer stipendiary ministers. Deaneries and circuits are re-configured, often bringing both into closer alignment with secular boundaries – boroughs, etc. In both Churches there is talk of having fewer but larger units.

As this happens, the missionary vocation of both the deanery and the circuit changes.

□ The deanery and the circuit become the ecclesial units best equipped to contribute to secular bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships – and the local Churches Together Group probably needs to be re-configured to match.

□ Deaneries and circuits achieve the necessary scale to be able to resource and manage specialised projects and chaplaincies, which might need to be set up as charities – e.g. youth work projects.

□ Deaneries and circuits become the natural context for exploring ‘fresh expressions’- new forms of Christian community for a new generation of disciples. The Church of England’s new Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure specifically opens up opportunities for new “Mission Initiatives”.

Needing each other

1. Complementary Resources

Deaneries and circuits are well placed to bring complementary resources to develop these new mission opportunities.

- Deaneries, in cases where they have been given these powers, can manage the deployment of personnel funded from the Diocesan Stipends Fund.
- Circuits sometimes have accumulated wealth from the sale of property, held in Circuit Advance Funds. Consent is given by the wider connexion to proposals from the circuit for investment from the Advance Fund in the re-development of premises and in the funding of personnel.

2 A shared learning environment

As a missionary vision releases people from dependency on ordained clergy, so deaneries and circuits can share resources for the training and development of lay ministries.

- Licensed Readers and Local Preachers, although their roles are not identical, share a common need for follow-up training and opportunities for study. Some of this could well be organised locally.
- The development of other forms of lay ministry – including pastoral work and leading worship – is something deaneries and circuits are well able to tackle together. Some dioceses already provide training programmes on a deanery basis.

Thinking strategically together – three examples

- The leadership in a deanery and a circuit, already meeting regularly and working together in a number of other ways, worked with the Local Strategic Partnership to provide internet access in a number of rural communities in their area.*
- The deanery and the circuit, working closely together in a seaside town, developed a project to provide a rota of volunteer lay chaplains in the town centre – a resource for shoppers, trades-people and holidaymakers.*
- The deanery and the circuit, developing a project already operating between two local churches, set up a charitable trust which is facilitating the appointment of youth workers across the area. Already neighbouring deaneries and circuits are planning ways of extending the work to their areas.*

C: First steps to partnership in mission

- Check boundaries and decide on an area of collaboration. Where the deanery and circuit share similar boundaries, life is obviously easier!
- Create a steering group, the core of which is likely to be the Rural/Area Dean and the Superintendent Minister plus a circuit steward and the Deanery Synod Lay Chair.
- Involve a representative of another Christian tradition as a participant observer.
- Alongside this, ensure regular, frequent and prayerful meetings between the Rural Dean and the Superintendent. These are essential.

- Look for opportunities to hold Deanery Chapter meetings with Methodist ministers present and/or Circuit staff meetings with Anglican clergy present – but don't create additional meetings just for the sake of it!
- Invite each other's clergy and ministers (with spouses) to all informal social events.
- Plan special agendas and workshops to bring together members of the Circuit Meeting and the Deanery Synod – but don't assume that the normal business of the two bodies can easily be done together.
- Make opportunities to dream dreams together – on away-days, with mission consultants, praying together, listening to God.
- Be aware that although developing close links between the ordained clergy is often the place to start, close links between lay people are what will enable the partnership to endure and deliver effective mission.

The mission agenda

The over-riding value of bringing deaneries and circuits closer together is that it then creates a climate of presumption in favour of joint initiatives more locally between individual churches and parishes.

Beyond that, joint ventures across the whole area deserve to be explored under five headings:

1. Chaplaincy – with other ecumenical partners
2. Youth work – ditto
3. Training programmes
4. Re-development of buildings
5. "Mission Initiatives" – fresh ways of being Gospel

Shared Ministry

Only as the relationship grows, and only as a clear need arises, will it be appropriate to authorise ‘shared ministry’¹ across the deanery and circuit – although this is something that may have happened for years in particular locations.

Four steps will achieve this:

- 1. For Methodists, the circuit will ask Conference to confer ‘Associate Minister’ status on the deanery clergy.*
- 2. For the Church of England, each parish (through its incumbent and PCC) will ask the diocesan bishop for permission for named Methodist ministers to conduct worship on a regular basis. This will include services of Holy Communion conducted in accordance with Methodist discipline.*
- 3. Each parish will similarly ask permission from the bishop for their clergy to conduct worship in Methodist churches in the circuit. This will include services of Holy Communion.*
- 4. The incumbents of the deanery will agree a document authorising their fellow clergy and Readers in the deanery to conduct worship in any Methodist church that is situated in their benefice.*

All this is possible for Church of England parishes within the framework of Canon B43. It cannot be done by the deanery en bloc.

¹ ‘Shared ministry’ needs to reflect the major contribution made by Methodist Local Preachers (and, for that matter, the often insufficiently realised contribution of Licensed Readers). In the light of this, Anglican parishes may need to review their expectation that their main Sunday service will always be Holy Communion.

If a serious commitment emerges between a deanery and a circuit to create a single ministerial team, the way forward is likely to be a so-called ‘Covenant Partnership’ – a Local Ecumenical Partnership to which all the churches in both deanery and circuit are individually committed. In the Church of England, the bishop would agree this under the terms of Canon B44.

D: A Final Thought:

Growing effective working relationships between deaneries and circuits must never be at the expense of working with members of other Christian traditions in the area.

Joint enterprise specifically between the deanery and the circuit often makes sense because other Christian traditions generally have far fewer congregations in the same geographical area, and so they will be pursuing a different (but hopefully complementary) missionary strategy.

Through their covenant commitment to each other, the Church of England and the Methodist Church are in a significant way ‘pioneers’. As part of the pilgrimage of all God’s people, our two Churches (and all who are members or adherents) are being challenged by our covenant commitment to explore a manner of discipleship to which *all* are called. It is a call to live a Gospel of healing and reconciliation, bearing witness to God’s covenant love, until all humankind, “all in heaven and on earth,” are one in Christ.

Resources

To catch a vision for the circuit:

Deaneries and circuits should study “Shaping the Future” together. This excellent study guide (XA282) is available, price £2.00, from Methodist Publishing House. Visit www.mph.org.uk

See also the ‘Building Confidence’ CDROM – full of resources for Circuit Reviews (MPH XA355, £2.00)

To catch a vision for the deanery:

Join the National Deanery Network, with its range of publications and biennial national conferences. See back cover for details or visit www.chdg.org.uk

To catch a vision for an Anglican-Methodist Covenant:

Visit the web site at www.anglican-methodist.org.uk

Find more details on this web site of the stories told in this booklet, by visiting the “Circuits and Deaneries” page under “Stories of Covenant Living.”

