

## **Susanna Wesley Foundation Conference 2017 - *Changing Church***

### **Case Study: The Aire & Calder Circuit**

#### **Colin Ride, Senior Circuit Steward**

#### **What was the situation we were facing in the church in the Ossett & Horbury circuit (Leeds District)?**

Over the years the Ossett & Horbury had decreased to four churches. The largest, in terms of membership, was a Methodist / URC church with ministers alternating between the two denominations.

Following the various Methodist Church reports: *Our Calling, Priorities for the Methodist Church* and *Mapping A Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission* circuits in the Yorkshire Districts were being encouraged to reflect on the future with regard to their relationships with one another, and where appropriate, create larger circuits.

In 2009 the Ossett & Horbury, Castleford, Pontefract & Normanton, and Wakefield Circuits agreed to seek to the formation of a single circuit, essentially covering Wakefield MDC. This gave an initial total of 36 churches (4 closed at the onset of the new circuit September 2011).<sup>1</sup> Of the four circuits, in their original format, only the Wakefield Circuit had a future beyond the next few years.

When the circuit began in 2011 there were nearly 1600 members, 13 full-time presbyters, and one-half time lay employee (family worker). To date there are 31 churches and just over 1500 members.

#### **How did we approach the problem / opportunity?**

The initial conversations were between the circuit superintendents and circuit stewards as to the viability of a new circuit, what challenges needed to be faced, what opportunities for mission would be presented and what structures would be needed. Above all there was a testing out of attitudes towards each other, holding a shared common vision of the way forward, and the development of trust between the four circuits. A structure was developed which included a “shadow executive” plus a number of working groups addressing particular issues. The “shadow executive” was formed by the staff of the four circuits plus the circuit stewards and chaired by one of the superintendents (of the four, two said they were going to move in 2011).

---

<sup>1</sup> As someone said: two closed because they ran out of money and two closed because they ran out of energy – both legitimate reasons for closing!

The essential element was building trust which was going to take time. The shadow executive ensured that a report was prepared after each monthly meeting and circulated across the four circuits, inviting comments. Constitutionally, the new circuit had no authority until it began in 2011 so all the circuit meetings needed to agree each stage of the process. We were supported by a District Mission Enabler. With some critical and creative insight, the four circuits agreed a common *Invitation Committee* so that staff stationing could be progressed.

### **What process was followed & what activities undertaken?**

We arranged opportunities for churches in the four circuits for occasional confidence building sessions (mainly Saturday mornings). They undertook a SWOT analysis relating to their own churches, and how they envisioned the circuit and what it might achieve (through this means the four churches said they needed to close).

The shadow executive debated a name for the new circuit and three suggestions were forthcoming. The name of “Aire & Calder Circuit” was adopted – both the River Aire and River Calder<sup>2</sup> run through the circuits, and the theological understanding of water as for baptism, cleansing, new beginnings and so on found a common focus.

### **Notable features, events or stages of the process**

Each stage of the process was agreed by each of the four circuits, so the shadow executive had to be mindful of local sensitivities and the time tabling of Circuit Meetings in order to get decisions made. Sometimes it was a bit fraught!

The shadow executive agreed that its initial membership was formed by staff (presbyters), circuit and eight Circuit Stewards, two each being elected by the respective Circuit Meetings. As it now is the Circuit Executive (Circuit Leadership team) comprises the superintendent minister, six presbyters, circuit development officer (presbyter) and eight Circuit Stewards. Each Circuit Steward carries a particular brief for an aspect of Circuit life, as well as sharing in all the generic responsibilities. Due process was followed for the election of a superintendent. This caused one of the main tensions. The two candidates had different skill sets, somewhat different visions of the way forward and approaches to the use

---

<sup>2</sup> The other two names were Mid Yorkshire (sounded too much like the NHS and was boring(!) and Greater Wakefield, but that was a non-starter in Pontefract and Castleford, probably due to Rugby League instincts of localism and local rivalry. However, Wakefield also objected as it did not want to be seen to dominate the new Circuit and a power struggle was thus avoided.

of power. Whilst there was some pain felt by the superintendent not appointed he stayed within the new circuit and became fully supportive of the appointed superintendent.

Circuit structures as “lite” as possible were agreed. There is a Circuit Assembly (open to all but with voting members, meets three times per year) and other mandatory committees (e.g. local preachers’ meeting). The Executive meets four times per year and has some delegated powers. A Mission Forum was formed (x 3 per year), as was a forum for work amongst children and young people plus a small Circuit Learning & Development group, which has oversight of training / learning opportunities for staff and volunteer development.

### **Outcomes achieved?**

- a. The pooling of resources did not mean more resource but much more flexibility in resource use; the Circuit Model Trust Fund was reshaped with missional objectives for its use, and a new application process designed; New monies arrived through property sales;
- b. A range of mission objectives, based on *Our Calling* were agreed as priorities;
- c. Some churches have been completely refurbished for mission, and one church is a substantial rebuild;
- d. Two full time Children’s & Family Workers have been appointed; a half time circuit administrator and circuit office have been established; a paid part time safeguarding officer was appointed (now two volunteers do this work); a part time circuit development officer was appointed (mainly to enable churches in their redevelopment processes). There are 12 F/T presbyters and 1 F/T Deacon;
- e. Churches experience different presbyters/deacon/local preachers leading worship
- f. Excellent circuit services on festival occasions, e.g. Advent, Lent, Easter Offering;
- g. A monthly circuit e-news enables communication to be more effective;
- h. Circuit prayer walks & Bible study are being developed
- i. Appointment of a chaplain (1 day per week) at the Methodist primary school in the circuit

- j. Through the Children's & Family Workers, relationships and significant input into various schools (mainly primary) have grown. The development of a Messy Church Forum & prayer spaces are two other achievements.
- k. Development of Trinity Mission, Castleford (working mainly with homeless people) and a deacon appointment in Airedale (according to many measures, suffering some of the worst deprivation in the country).

**Looking back what have we learnt about change from the experience?**

That change is constant; trust, honesty, flexibility and transparency are essential values and processes which need to be in-built into all developments. Good communication and learning are essential tools in the development process. Missional risk taking is encouraged and supported.

The general development of the Circuit has been very positive. Yes, we face challenging times and nothing is guaranteed but we feel we are much better equipped in body, mind and spirit to face the future. We praise God for the inspiration and leading of the Holy Spirit in this venture.

\*\*\*\*\*



**Colin Ride** (MPhil BA) is currently Senior Circuit Steward in the Aire & Calder Circuit, with a brief for its mission agenda; local preacher & Bible study leader, joint organiser of local church based film club. Formerly Area Secretary for Europe (2001 - 2009) in Methodist World Church Relationships; prior to that Methodist Training & Development Officer (Yorkshire Districts). Initially trained as a professional youth worker before moving into training and adult learning. As a passionate European has a committed interest in peace and reconciliation which he still believes to be the underlying purpose of the European Union.