

Gordano Valley Circuit Mission

Action Plan 2023-2027



**Gordano Valley
Methodist Circuit**

Serving Methodists in North Somerset

This document is in three parts.

The first part sets out the Mission Statement of the Gordano Valley Circuit.

The second part explains our situation from 2023 to date.

The third part details our strategic plan for pursuing that mission in the face of the urgent need to grow.

Part One: Gordano Valley Mission Statement

Our mission: to encourage and enable people of all ages to become followers of Jesus Christ, and to learn and grow in the Christian faith.

Our conviction: we are committed to celebrating and sharing the good news of the Gospel—that God loves us, Jesus died for our sins and is risen, and the Holy Spirit gives us strength and inspiration in our daily lives. We seek growth and renewal through the centrality of prayer and scripture, worship and sacrament.

Our calling: to draw where appropriate on circuit, district, connexional and ecumenical resources to encourage churches and individuals to pursue the calling of the Methodist Church in the following ways:

Worship

- + By offering God-glorifying worship and teaching which is engaging and relevant to people of all ages, backgrounds, and stages of faith.
- + By encouraging and supporting ministers, local preachers and worship leaders to adopt innovative and creative approaches to worship.

Learning and caring

- + By offering appropriate pastoral care to those inside and outside the church.
- + By identifying and resourcing training needs in the circuit.
- + By prioritising 'good practice' in all things including the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, risk assessment, health and safety, employment and trusteeship.
- + By actively promoting cultures of hospitality and generosity in response to God's gracious love for all.
- + By offering spiritual resources to support mental and emotional health.

Service

- + By recognising that everyone is valuable and has something to offer and by encouraging everyone's gifts.
- + Through good stewardship of money and buildings, ensuring that the churches in the circuit are well maintained, well-resourced and welcoming to all.
- + By resourcing ministers and lay staff to work in mission alongside circuit stewards and the congregations of the circuit's churches.
- + By encouraging churches and individuals to adopt sustainable lifestyles and to take actions to safeguard our planet home.
- + By encouraging churches and individuals to show solidarity with those who suffer disadvantage, to challenge injustice and to promote freedom and flourishing for all.

Evangelism

- + By encouraging and equipping all Christians and congregations to fulfil their God-given roles as sharers in his mission.
- + By offering regular discipleship courses with the invitation to embrace membership of the Methodist Church.
- + Seeking to reach all people.
- + Working in local communities to build bridges with those outside church life.

Part Two: Gordano Valley Circuit mission – our situation so far...

Growth is our priority

Evangelism and church growth has always been part of our vision and integral to the Methodist movement, and indeed, should always be. It should be emphasised that there is nothing new in identifying it as a priority!

Nevertheless, we are at a juncture where we recognise that intentional, targeted growth is our key priority at this time.

The challenges

We face two key challenges at this time: church membership and financial resources have both been declining for some time. Our vision is to reverse that decline and grow.

The impact of Covid and lockdown on churches everywhere was immense and the challenge of recovering and rebuilding active church membership and financial resources has been significant. In 2022 the CLT looked at the circuit-wide trends in membership between 2009 and 2021, and an overall decline of from 727 to 502 (31%) was identified for that period. It should be highlighted that such figures do not

give the full picture. Throughout that period there have been many stories of significant growth which membership figures alone do not convey. For example, there are many who attend worship services and who are regularly engaged in the life of our churches through midweek groups, Alpha, youth and children's ministries, and all sorts of outreach activity, which membership figures do not capture. Nevertheless, membership is an important and relevant figure, used for statistical returns and financial assessment, and must be taken seriously. Our circuit treasurer calculated that if membership continues to decline at the same rate, it will be down to 350 by the end of the next five-year stationing period for 2024 to 2029. Circuit budget projections, based on reasonable assumed rates of inflation and taking into account a number of variables, suggest that the medium to long term sustainability of a circuit staff team of four full-time presbyteral ministers is simply unaffordable if the membership decline continues at the same rate.

Alongside these challenges, the connexional availability of ministers continues to radically reduce. The stationing system currently looks to a ratio of approximately 200 members per minister. Even if it was affordable, it would seem unlikely that four ministers would be stationed in a circuit with a membership that falls significantly below 800 without there being signs that the trend is significantly reversing.

Our strengths and opportunities

A realistic mission strategy must take serious account of the challenges, but will also recognise the strengths and opportunities that exist. We must not be naïve, but neither should we underestimate our potential for growth. While overall membership figures may have declined circuit-wide over recent years, there have been – and continue to be – stories of growth, ranging from 'green shoots' early-stage experiences that are just beginning to emerge, through to more developed strategies that are more tried and tested. These should be shared, listened to, and learned from in order to engage the genuine possibilities that lie before us.

We are at a juncture where we recognise the urgent need to reverse decline. Without downplaying that urgency, it's important to be aware that we are taking steps from a certain vantage point that takes recent trends seriously but from which we are in a position to do something about it. In other words, it's not too late to grasp nettles. We may not have the same level of resources to invest in growth five years from now; but we do have those resources now, and to that end we are currently in a position where we can look to saving costs in some areas while at the same time invest in growth.

For all the financial challenges we face, it's important to recognise the generous spirit that can be found in our churches. There is a long track record of readiness to respond to appeals, whether that is for building projects, appointment of lay staff or simply meeting the ongoing need to pay circuit assessments. Growing a deeper level of discipleship and expanding a culture of sacrificial giving, particularly across what are the current fringes of our churches, can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. The relative affluence of the Gordano Valley area might be noted here.

The people in our churches are also very generous with their time. Sourcing various teams and leadership positions can be a challenge in churches with an ageing demographic. Without downplaying the scale of this challenge, it should be recognised that a culture of readiness to serve is a vital characteristic of our churches, even with falling membership numbers.

A major strength of the Gordano Valley Circuit is that it is relatively compact. The eight churches are located closely enough to give us a sense of collective missionary focus, and in communities where population is growing. Our buildings, which are all in good strategic locations, are in great condition, with user-friendly, modern facilities (no pews!), and well-equipped with digital technology.

It should also be highlighted that the Gordano Valley Circuit has a longstanding culture of being outward facing and which values growth. While some nettles may need to be grasped, there is already a deep heart for mission that pervades the DNA of our churches, evidenced not least by the appointment of a circuit Evangelism Enabler in recent years, as well as various youth / children/ families and outreach workers in the individual churches. When it comes to persuading our people that growth is necessary, we are not starting from scratch.

Shaping the circuit from 2024

In response to the recognised challenges identified above, the CLT engaged in a process of consultation across the eight churches between November 2022 and February 2023. The focus of this exercise was on the question of how many staff we might expect to be deployed in future years and how the sections of the circuit might be strategically configured. A whole range of possibilities were identified and explored, including closing buildings, merging churches and the potential revision of circuit boundaries. It was acknowledged that such possibilities needed to be kept under review, but it was decided that the following steps should be taken:

1. Reduce the staff team from four to three full time presbyters when two current ministers leave in 2024;
2. Reconfigure the sections from 2024 as follows:
 - + Nailsea + Backwell + Yatton
 - + Portishead High St + Redcliffe Bay + Pill
 - + Christchurch LEP + Kenn Rd + superintendency

In September 2025 our Superintendent indicated that he felt God calling him to exercise his ministry within another denomination. This left the circuit one full time presbyter down and with some big decisions to make. Would the circuit enter the stating process and seek a like for like replacement or wait for a year and reconfigure the circuit staffing in line with our Mission Action Plan. It was quickly decided that we should wait a year and seek to further resource ministry and mission in a different way. The circuit also agreed that we should move to 2.5 presbyters, reshape the sections within the circuit and each have a particular mission focus, and that the sections would look like this:

- + Yatton + Kenn Road + Christchurch LEP = f/t presbyter
- + Portishead High St + Redcliffe Bay + Pill + Superintendency = f/t presbyter
- + Nailsea + Backwell = 0.5 prebyter

Alongside this new formation the Nailsea/Backwell and the Portishead/Pill sections would continue to look at employing lay pastors to work alongside the presbyters in those sections.

The reasons for making this decision was two-fold. Firstly the new sections (mission areas) fitted better together in what they felt called to do and the resources they had and also it would free the circuit up somewhat from needing to find the money to pay for three full time presbyters thus releasing some finances to fund mission within the circuit.

Planning for Growth, not decline

From the outset, the strategic reviews highlighted a strong and widely held conviction across the circuit that we are not about the business of managing decline. The difficult decision to reduce the size of the ministerial team is motivated by the intention of reversing decline, not resigning to it. The strategic consultations highlighted a strong and widely held conviction that decisions around the reconfiguration of the circuit should be set within a wider mission plan that

proactively seeks to address the need to grow in an intentional and targeted way, bringing all the churches together into a closer working relationship. That plan is set out in the third section of this document – our strategic plan to target growth over the next four years, starting from immediate effect.

Part Three: strategic plan to target growth

Our key priority as a circuit is to grow – both membership (making disciples) and financial resources. The first is the primary goal, while the second is so that this primary goal can be invested in further. In order to achieve this, we need to:

- + Nurture a more explicit culture of intentionality towards growth;
- + Provide practical means of resourcing growth.

Nurturing a more explicit culture of intentionality towards growth

Culture can't be simply manufactured, but we can take proactive steps towards encouraging the missionary heart that already exists within our churches. The following strategies are identified:

- + Place growth on the agenda of all church and circuit meetings, with the aim of sustaining discussion and accountability around time-specific growth targets;
- + Preach and teach in Sunday worship and midweek activity on the theme of growth. This can be ensured through planning of appropriate material for local church delivery, as well as through equipping preachers at circuit LP meetings;
- + Planning and ordering church life and activity around the core priority of growth.

)It is anticipated that during the connexional year or 2026, the circuit will once again review and update our Mission Action Plan with a view to a new plan being in place and implemented in September 2027).

The next section sets out how this can be resourced...

Providing practical means of resourcing growth

There are already many stories of growth taking place within the circuit, and these need to be shared, listened to, and learned from. To this end, the circuit will arrange events where representatives from all eight churches can gather and share resources.

- + Around 6 to 8 such events will take place through the year;
- + There will be a mutual understanding that all eight churches will engage
 - we're in this together!
- + Each gathering will be an opportunity for fellowship, praying together, sharing resources, sharing the 'wins' as well as building one another up in encouragement where things may not have gone so well;
- + The events will give focus to a range of growth-related themes, such as specific outreach resources, faith exploration tools (eg Alpha), work with youth, children and families, senior citizens, and may include outside speakers.

The CLT, reporting to the Circuit Meeting, will continue to monitor and review this strategy and its impact on the growth across the circuit. The Circuit Meeting will encourage and expect each of the eight churches to present and report on annual growth targets.