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# Kent Estuary Mission Community - a proposed direction of travel

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Report from the Working Group



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**January 2026**

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## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Working Group's task was to develop proposals for the direction of travel for the eight churches of the Mission Community (see annex 1). If the proposals are accepted by the church councils there will be much further detail to be worked through, involving the Carlisle Diocese and Cumbria Circuit, as well as the eight congregations.

1.2 The eight churches each have different histories and traditions and a distinctive character and identity. All maintain their own pattern of worship and are active in their communities, on their own or in partnerships. Each has a faithful and committed congregation. However, to a greater or lesser extent, all share an underlying trend of ageing and gradually reducing congregations and all face increasing practical challenges, reduction in clergy and financial pressures. The trajectory is one of decline; just keeping going becomes increasingly hard and there is little scope for mission. The current situation is not sustainable.

1.3. Rather than seeking to manage decline, our proposals aim to lay the foundations for refreshment, renewal and growth in the years ahead. They relate not just to structures and processes but to how our church life reflects Christ and how human, financial and physical resources are used in His name. They will require us to grow relationships and trust, which will take time. These proposals offer a key step in a longer journey that will enable the Church community in the Kent Estuary better to fulfil our collective calling to be the ongoing body of Christ in this place,

## 2. The Vision for the churches in the Kent Estuary

2.1 The KEMC vision statement is “Sharing God’s love in Christ”. This always has been the Church’s aspiration and continues to be so. If our churches are to rise to the challenge in today’s world, it needs to be complemented by shared, concrete commitments that can be the basis for planning and action. The pattern of ministry and the governance arrangements can then be shaped to support their delivery.

**We propose that, more effectively to share God’s love in Christ within the villages of the Kent Estuary, the eight churches, individually and collectively agree to:**

- **Be truly ecumenical**
- **Support a Christian presence in each village**
- **Sustain existing congregations**
- **Grow lay leadership and ministries**
- **Grow new disciples of all ages, including the “lost generation” and with an emphasis on children and families**
- **Enable new ways of being Church**
- **Learn from the experience of others**
- **Be inclusive and open to the communities**
- **Use available resources efficiently**
- **Be bold, evolving and open to change.**

## 3. Towards a Pattern of Ministry

3.1 The fact that the Ministry Offer from the five parishes is no longer enough to meet the diocesan cost of two Church of England priests presents an opportunity for a fresh look at how ministry across the villages can be shaped more effectively to support the sharing of God’s love in Christ

3.2 After meeting the cost of one Church of England priest, the current level of giving across the five parishes would mean that £61,000 is available to invest in new posts, working either full or part-time. Their

specific nature would be determined in the light of priorities which are agreed, but might be a Children and Family Leader, Pioneer Minister or Community Chaplain. Such posts would help enable new engagement, witness and service in the villages, building a new momentum, growing new disciples and potentially growing new forms of worshipping community.

3.3 The reduction in the number of clergy will have direct implications for the pattern and/or form of services for the current congregations. There will be more lay-led services, which will require the proactive development and support of more lay worship leaders. There will also be more joint services, particularly in villages with two churches. Coming together more often may be difficult for some, but it brings the benefit of larger congregations with the potential for more vibrant worship. Importantly, it is one way to express the fact that we all belong to one Church - not just to a particular church building.

3.4 Similarly, there will be a potential impact on pastoral care. There will need to be the proactive development of lay pastoral leadership in each church and its community. This is unlikely to have a standard form and should be developed in a way that is sensitive to the circumstances of each church.

3.5 The Church of England priest and the Methodist minister would lead an ecumenical Ministry Team. This would include the new post-holders, along with the lay people with leadership roles in worship and pastoral care in each church. This Team would provide leadership, co-ordination and support for worship and witness, teaching and service across the eight churches and their communities.

**We propose that the direction of travel should include the development of a single ecumenical Ministry Team serving the whole of the Kent Estuary.**

#### **4. Towards Governance Arrangements**

4.1 As it stands, the five parishes and three Methodist churches are all separate legal entities. The church councils are trustees, with legal responsibility focused on their own church. The Mission Community has no formal existence and can only operate consensually. These arrangements foster separateness. They do not provide a workable foundation for the work of a single Ministry Team or the effective use of the resources available for refreshment, renewal and growth.

4.2 New arrangements will need to balance a strategic overview of the whole area with a local perspective. They will need to enable choices to be made about priorities and about the response to emerging opportunities or challenges. At the same time, they will need to enable appropriate decision-making within each church. They will need to create efficient ways of conducting business, without absorbing lots of time and energy in meetings or leaving people feeling disenfranchised. They should be intelligible to the wider public and, given that the Ministry Team will be working in each village, should convey the message that, though we are many, we are one body.

4.3 This could be achieved with a new Parish of the Kent Estuary, incorporating the five churches each of which could be a Parish Church. The one PCC could include representatives of each church, as well as the Ministry Team and would hold overall accountability. Each of the parish churches would have its own church council, with a formal agreement about the balance of responsibilities between it and the PCC.

4.4 The Parish should have a formal partnership agreement with the three Methodist churches. This should include their representation on the PCC. The requirements of the two national churches impose some constraints, but the agreement can be constructed so that the impact of these is minimised. In its day-to-day functioning, the Parish would be ecumenical and, in effect, be the Mission Community.

4.5 Keeping the various networks of people informed, co-ordinating the Ministry Team and meeting the administrative requirements of the eight churches and of the diocese and circuit will represent a significant

communication and administration burden. A paid, part-time administrator should therefore be appointed from within the available funding.

**We propose that the direction of travel include the creation of a single, new Parish of the Kent Estuary, with five parish churches and in a partnership agreement with the Methodist Church.**

## 5. Transition

5.1 If this direction of travel is approved, much further work will be required on the detail, involving the Diocese and Circuit as well as the eight churches. Legal processes will also be necessary. The timescale is not clear, but there will be a prolonged period before new, formal arrangements are in place.

5.2 Alongside this, the proposed direction involves a change in culture, as we reorientate from a focus on sustaining our own clergy-led church fellowship, to a more collective perspective on renewal and growth. It will take time to grow the new culture and the relationships and trust that will sustain it – during which there may be uncertainty, and difficulty in seeing the benefits.

5.3 The trajectory described in 1.2 means that exploring options for change is unavoidable. As leaders the clergy will have a particular role in constructively assisting and managing the process of change. As they do this, they will need to:

- Pastorally support people who are challenged by it.
- Grow a collegiate approach that facilitates the contribution of all
- Be at the heart of enabling the congregations to be engaged in shaping the future
- Respond creatively to difficulties and impediments

5.4 The sense of uncertainty and disruption in the immediate future must be addressed from the outset. Failure to do so will have real implications for individuals, as well as a lasting impact on the ability of the congregations to fulfil the shared commitments that are the basis for the change.

**As an integral part of the direction of travel,  
we propose that the transition is underpinned by:**

- **Prayer – actively sustaining and supporting collective and individual prayer**
- **Communication – with regular sharing of progress and active listening to hopes and fears across the congregations**
- **Pastoral Care – with specific initiatives to support people during the period of change**
- **Lay Leadership development – with targeted action to grow leaders for worship and pastoral care in each community**
- **Engagement – revising KEMC arrangements so congregations can feel connected.**

**The group's final proposal is that the Leadership Team  
seek early agreement from the diocese for 18 months' funding  
for an additional priest who will lead and support this transitional programme.**

## 6. Conclusion

6.1 Over the last 1200 years, the Christian presence here has evolved in response to circumstances and opportunities. We now find ourselves in a new season of change. These proposals aim to sustain the existing congregations whilst also laying the foundation for a new momentum of witness, mission and service that will grow new disciples who will be those who continue to share God's love in Christ.

## Annexe 1- The Background

Early in 2025, the Rural Dean, Canon Anne Pettifor, and Canon Richard Snow met with each PCC on behalf of the Archdeaconry Mission and Pastoral Committee (AMAP). They explored aspects of congregational life and activity and the PCC's hopes and concerns about the future. Following their report back to the Committee, AMAP asked the KEMC Leadership Team to ensure that the 5 parishes and their ecumenical partners formulate their shared vision and governance proposals and, within this, outline a vision that will shape an affordable new pattern of ministry for the next five years. The Leadership Team is to report by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026.

### Process

The Leadership Team agreed that the way of doing this should be as open and as engaging as possible and that the report to AMAP must include the outcome of each PCC's formal consideration of any proposals.

They sent a letter to the members of the congregations with an invitation to an open meeting to be chaired by the Archdeacon. The letter outlined the issues, including the fact that it was now evident that the Ministry Offer from the 5 parishes was insufficient to meet the diocesan cost of two priests.

The open meeting on October 15<sup>th</sup> was attended by over 70 people. It included feedback from the earlier discussions with each PCC and a presentation on the diocesan context for the Ministry Offer. It also included an invitation for people to volunteer to be members of a Working Group to develop proposals for a direction of travel relating to the vision, pattern of ministry and governance. These would subsequently be formally considered by the church councils. The group was asked to produce a report by the end of January, at which point there would be a second open meeting.

By the closing date (31<sup>st</sup> October), thirteen people had volunteered. Two subsequently stood back from the Group's actual meetings in order specifically to support its discussion through prayer, linking also with a small network of others. In addition, two others were unable to attend most meetings because of work and family commitments but received all the papers. The stipendiary clergy chose not to be members of the Group but received all the meeting papers.

Congregations were asked to hold the process in their prayers.

### Working Group

The Working Group held its first meeting in mid-November and met eight times before presenting its proposals at the second open meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> January.

The Group circulated an update through the congregations at the beginning of December. This included the proposed shared commitments that would provide the basis for further work on the pattern of ministry and governance. Comments and questions were invited (see annexe 2).

In the course of its deliberations, the Group met with the Diocesan Director of Missional Revitalisation, and representatives of the Western Dales Mission Community and Rainbow Parish. Information was sought also from the Archdeacon and from the Diocesan Ecumenical Officer, Stewardship Enabler and Pastoral Officer. Individual members of the group also drew on the experience and knowledge of personal contacts in both Church of England and Methodist churches.

Following the meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> January, the church councils (the five PCCs and three Methodist Church Councils) will formally consider the report in their meetings in February and March.

The councils were asked to report their conclusions to the KEMC Leadership Team to enable them to report to AMAP by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026.

## Annexe 2

Comments from members of congregations	Working Group's Responses	
Common admin database	To be considered with proposed admin post	
Recognise pastoral and service workload	To be managed by ministry team	
Offer church buildings for community use	Good point but not a Direction of Travel issue	
Suggestions about a prayerful approach and outreach on a spiritual basis connecting with the natural world. Be confident God will provide	Sort of thing the proposed Ministry Team should consider	
Provide transport/taxi for joint services	A suggestion to be considered by Leadership Team	
Admin support is essential	Agreed and in proposals	
Suggested additional Commitments	Strengthen links between churches	Important and Intrinsic to proposals, but a process point, rather than a shaping commitment
	Foster belonging to valued Mission Community	<i>ditto</i>
	Demonstrate values – reach out and don't expect support in return	Already implicit in “be inclusive and open to the communities”
	Recognise gifts and strengths and share what we do well	Rather than an additional commitment, this should be reflected in the text.
	Learn from each other and from other MCs	Added as a new commitment: “Learn from the experience of others”,
	Be bold - even if no quick return or not appealing to existing	Amend final commitment by adding the word “bold”:
Focus on identified priorities	Identifying/managing priorities is built into the proposed governance arrangements.	
Prioritise Children and families	Sympathetic but the priorities will be determined by new governance arrangements	