

PROPOSED MERGER OF TWO SYNOD AREAS

1 Purpose

1.1 This paper brings to Synod Together a proposal to merge the West Kent & East Sussex Synod Area (WKESSA) with the East Kent Synod Area (EKSA).

2 Background

2.1 The principal task of a Synod Area is to support the mission of the local churches within it.

2.2 In terms of URC members, EKSA and WKESSA are both relatively small: EKSA has around 350 and WKESSA around 700. The number of churches in each Area has fallen since their creation in 2010 and now there are 16 churches in EKSA (of which eight are LEPs) and 22 churches in WKESSA (including three LEPs). While some people have worked very hard for these Synod Areas, it has become increasingly difficult to cover all the basic tasks required of a Synod Area, let alone support all the churches enthusiastically to the high standard everyone would want.

2.3 A year ago some very informal conversations began about the possibility that a merged Area would serve the churches better. The two Area Leaders were aware that there seemed no prospect of filling all the basic Officer posts in the existing Areas in 2023; and 2024 was likely to be even more difficult.

2.4 A widening circle of prayer and discussion suggested that a merger might now be optimal and eventually the two Area Meetings asked for the two Area Leaders and the two Pastoral Committee Convenors to prepare a draft Merger Plan so that the principles and practicalities could be assessed in detail.

2.5 The two Summer Area Meetings considered this plan independently and, after time for questions and discussion, voted in each case by a very large majority to ask the Synod to merge the two Areas:

EKSA 10 in favour; 2 against; 1 abstention

WKESSA 16 in favour; 1 against; 3 abstentions

3 Possible Consequences

3.1 If Synod Together discerns that it is right to support the strong request from the two Synod Areas, Synod Council encourages the idea of calling the new Synod Area "Kent & East Sussex Synod Area" (KESSA), this being consistent with the style of titles used for the other Areas.

3.2 Inevitably, the two Synod Areas do not operate in exactly the same way and a range of practical adjustments that will need to be made for a merged Area have been identified. More will doubtless emerge. It is likely that if a merged Area is agreed, the two current Area Leaders would serve as its joint Leaders for a limited transitional period of up to one year.

3.3 In one of the more sparsely populated parts of the Southern Synod, it is not surprising that the implications for travel have been the most frequent topic for comment. In fact the West-East length of the new Synod Area is little more than the existing Northeast-Southwest length of WKESSA and of course very much shorter than the parallel journey distances friends travel routinely in some other URC Synods. If all concerned offer some flexibility and creativity in the Lord's service, we look forward to new friendships growing with brothers and sisters in Christ and ensuring that even remote churches feel loved and supported.

3.4 If the merger is agreed, as much as possible of our work would function as one from January 2024. We have volunteers willing to be appointed to all the key Officer posts in a merged Synod Area. We will need to learn as we proceed how our churches are best supported. If it proved to be the case that any of the churches on the western fringe of the new Area felt they would prefer to look west and join one of the adjoining Synod Areas, there is a process that can consider a request for that.

3.5 If Synod Together discerns a merger to be the way forward, we would hope that on a Saturday morning in January or February, KESSA would hold a celebratory act of worship followed by cheerful fellowship with splendid food to thank God for new opportunities and to launch new patterns of shared life as the Body of Christ.

Recommendation

Synod Together agrees to the requests of the East Kent and West Kent & East Sussex Synod Areas to remove the border between them and create a single Kent & East Sussex Synod Area from January 2024, to support all the churches currently within EKSA and WKESSA.

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