

28. The Role of a District Chair

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| Resolution | 28/1. The Conference receives the Report. |

Summary of content and impact

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| Subject and aims | To reflect on the role of a District Chair in the light of changing patterns of oversight, trusteeship and governance. |
| Main points | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflection on the current situation• Understandings of oversight• The role of District Chairs in Oversight• Evolving roles and teams for shared oversight• Deputising for and assisting the Chair• The Chair beyond their District• Recommendations |
| Background context and relevant documents (with function) | What is a District Chair? (2006), Ministry in the Methodist Church (2021), Oversight and Trusteeship (2022), Oversight, Trusteeship and Leadership (2022) |

Section A – Introduction

1. The current situation

- 1.1 The 2022 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Ministries Committee, to bring a report on the role of the District Chair to the 2023 Conference. This direction arose from the wider work being undertaken regarding Oversight and Trusteeship and which (at that time) also included proposals for a connexional process to reduce the number of Districts. While those proposals were not accepted, the changing landscape of the Connexion indicates that work on the role of a District Chair is still needed and the Faith and Order Committee offers this report.
- 1.2 At Methodist Union in 1932 there were some 60 Districts none of which had 'separated' (full time) Chairmen, as they then were. Much of the present pattern

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of Districts derives from decisions implemented in 1957 to introduce separated Chairs and reduce the number of mainland Districts to 28 (together with Welsh speaking and island Districts which retained non-separated Chairs). Since then, further changes have included the creation in 2006 of the London District (with most of the rest of the previous four London Districts forming new South East and Bedfordshire, Essex and Hertfordshire Districts) and the more recent creation of Wales Synod Cymru in 2022 encompassing English and Welsh speaking work.

- 1.3 Following the decisions of the 2022 Conference, there is no connexional process for the reorganisation of Districts. One consequence of this is that, in the short to medium term, there is likely to be a very mixed pattern of Districts: some will form large regional Districts (eg the proposed North West England District), others will merge with perhaps one neighbouring District (eg the proposed merger of the Birmingham District with the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District) while others will continue as they are today. Most Districts have separated Chairs (ie they do not have other duties besides being the Chair) but some (eg Isle of Man and Channel Islands) do not. It is not the function of this report to debate the merits of different models of District but, acknowledging that a diversity of arrangements will be a reality for the Methodist Church for the foreseeable future, to explore the implications of this diversity for the role of District Chair.
- 1.4 Unsurprisingly, most recent job descriptions for Chairs of District (and two for Deputy Chairs – for Shetland and Lincolnshire) followed a similar pattern but also reflect an unsurprising diversity of factors given the different contexts and sizes of District across the Connexion. All but one job description focused only on the role of the Chair in the District rather than on any connexional role. The exception is one of the newly proposed larger Districts, the North West England District, which is ‘conceived to operate in a different way to the established Districts across the Connexion’ with the Chair expected to offer leadership within the District but with a clear connexional focus. This diversity is expected to increase as more mergers take place and as structures develop.

2. Oversight

- 2.1 In order to enable our reflection on the role of a District Chair, some fundamental concepts need to be considered at the outset. One of these is the concept of ‘oversight’. It is no coincidence that this work has arisen as part of the broader work on ‘Oversight and Trusteeship’ and consequently no surprise that oversight is a key concept for this report.

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- 2.2 Building on the ecumenical consensus report *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM),¹ the Conference statement *Ministry in the Methodist Church*² stated that 'Churches affirm that the ministry of oversight, as all ministry in the Church, needs to be exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways' and went on to note that 'an important aspect of the Methodist understanding of oversight is that it is corporate in the first instance (residing in the Conference) and then secondarily focused in specific individuals and groups (lay and ordained).'
- 2.3 These affirmations highlight different senses in which oversight needs to be considered: the communal, the collegial and the personal following BEM and the corporate as holding a particular significance for us as Methodists. We therefore seek at the outset to clarify what each of these signifies and its place in our Methodist understanding.
- 2.4 *Communal* oversight is oversight which is shared more generally between different forms of ministry. It will include both lay and ordained and may be more formal or informal: including but not limited to formal corporate bodies such as Synods, Circuit Meetings and Church Councils. Communal oversight may also operate through wider informal networks and relationships which enable the good functioning of the formal bodies, for example a circuit staff team working together to facilitate the oversight of a Circuit.
- 2.5 *Collegial* oversight is the oversight shared between the same form of ministry. Key examples would include the mutual oversight exercised by the local preachers in a Circuit, presbyters together in a District or deacons within the Order. Like communal oversight it may have more formal or informal expressions. In certain cases it will be related to corporate oversight through such bodies as the Presbyterian Session of the Synod and the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order.
- 2.6 *Personal* oversight is the oversight exercised by an individual because of the ministry entrusted to them. As *Ministry in the Methodist Church*³ put it:

Individuals are appointed to a variety of offices in order to exercise particular kinds of oversight, for example in Circuits ministers and local preachers build up the Church through preaching and teaching, ministers and circuit stewards provide leadership, and Superintendents have oversight of all the ministers and probationers stationed in the Circuit. [...]

1 World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M26

2 https://www.methodist.org.uk/documents/6543/conf-2021-8-ministry-in-the-methodist-church_SQOejwG.pdf, paras 6.4 and 6.5

3 Para 6.5

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In Methodist understanding, oversight is shared, even when exercised by individuals as they would usually collaborate with, be accountable to and be appointed by others, deriving their authority from the Conference.

- 2.7 Methodists lay particular emphasis on *corporate* forms of oversight, that is oversight exercised through the courts of the Church. As *Ministry in the Methodist Church* affirmed, this is primary for Methodism and the Conference represents our supreme expression of oversight. Both communal and collegial forms of oversight may be exercised by corporate bodies: for example, the Representative Session of the Conference (communal) and the Presbyteral Session of the Conference (collegial). This should not be seen as a fourth form of oversight alongside BEM's three but as a way in which such oversight may be exercised, the critical point being that the oversight belongs to the corporate body as such. Communal and collegial oversight may also be exercised in less formal ways.
- 2.8 These forms of oversight are not separate but inter-related. While, for Methodists, the corporate oversight of the Conference always remains primary, communal, collegial and personal oversight each need the other in order to achieve its purpose: for example, the decisions of the courts of the church require the faithfulness of those appointed to particular ministries to carry them into effect. Individuals in their ministry need the support and encouragement of the wider people of God to be able to serve as God has called them.

Section B – The Ministry of District Chairs

The District Chair and Oversight

- 3.1 The role of the District Chair is defined by Standing Orders and reflected upon at length in the *What is a District Chair* report (2006). These descriptions remain the basis upon which the Methodist Church understands the role of the District Chair.

Standing Order 424 describes the role of the District Chair in this way:

(1) The prime duty of a Chair is to further the work of God in the District; to this end he or she will use all the gifts and graces he or she has received, being especially diligent to be a pastor to the ministers and probationers and to lead all the people of the District in the work of preaching and worship, evangelism, pastoral care, teaching and administration.

(2) The Chair, in conjunction with the members of the Synod in its respective sessions, shall be responsible to the Conference for the observance within the District of Methodist order and discipline.

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(3) It is the duty of the Chair to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the presbyters and presbyteral probationers in the District.

- 3.2 The *What is a District Chair* report (2006) explains the way that the Chair might 'further the work of God in the District' by using the term oversight, which is expressed through three main kinds of activity:

To fulfil its purpose, the District requires *oversight* in the broadest sense of that term, and in particular (but not exclusively) through theologically informed *governance*, theologically informed *management* and theologically informed *leadership*.⁴

Using the terms in section 2 (above), the Chair takes part in communal, collegial, personal and corporate oversight to exercise governance, management and leadership in the District.

- 3.3 Standing Order 400 provides that the primary function of a District is to advance the mission of the Church in a region, in broad terms by enabling Circuits (and the churches that make them up) to cooperate and to share resources and by discharging those functions which the Circuits cannot do alone. Their role is one way by which the Conference itself oversees and promotes the Church's mission. One way of understanding this is to suggest that the representative role which is laid on all ministers has particular weight in the context of the Chair's role with its particular emphasis on the mission of the church and the discipline of the Conference.
- 3.4 As described above in section 2, oversight in the Methodist Church is communal, collegial and personal with particular emphasis being laid upon the corporate exercise of oversight. The Chair shares in this oversight with the presbyters, deacons, lay officers, committees and other structures of the District. Much of this will be exercised through the corporate bodies of the District, especially the Synod and the District Policy Committee as well as in broader collegial and communal expressions. However, there are some particular tasks and situations in which the Chair exercises personal oversight within the District in a defined way.
- 3.5 The Chair exercises personal oversight by being 'responsible to the Conference for the observance within the District of Methodist order and discipline'.⁵ Though

4 *What is a District Chair* sect.17

5 SO 424(1)

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SO 424 (2) states that this is 'in conjunction with the members of the Synod in its respective sessions', there are situations in which it would be appropriate for the Chair to take representative personal responsibility. These might include the bearing of representative accountability for failures regarding management, governance or leadership in the district.

- 3.6 The Chair exercises personal 'oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and probationers in the District.'⁶ There are elements of this role which can be shared, but there are personal relationships required which the Chair has the responsibility to develop.
- 3.7 The Chair exercises personal oversight as part of the complaints process, for example, when acting as the responsible person with power of suspension 'in the case of a complaint which might form the subject matter of a ministerial charge.'⁷ As with all personal oversight in the Methodist Church, this is also shared and can only be exercised when following the procedures of SO 1130.
- 3.8 The other forms of oversight are expressed in multiple ways through the life of the District, and in these the Chair has a leading role, though always shared with others. What follows are only primary examples.
 - The Chair takes a leading role in the governance structures of the District which exercise corporate oversight, primarily the Representative Session of the Synod and the District Policy Committee.
 - The Chair takes a leading role in *Communal* oversight by encouraging mutual support and encouragement in all contexts throughout the District.
 - The Chair takes a leading role in *Collegial* oversight through the Presbyteral Session of Synod.
- 3.9 The Chair, with the Lay Stationing Rep, has a pastoral, strategic, discerning, and missional role to play in the stationing of presbyters, and in the service of Circuits. Together they are called to serve the Connexion in the stationing process, and to hold with care those who are affected by stationing. The Chairs represent the presbyters and Circuits of the Connexion through their knowledge of them and discern with others how to resource the Church with the ordained ministry God is providing.
- 3.10 As far as sharing the work of stationing presbyters is concerned, there is a need attentively to listen to the shaping of a presbyter's call as they consider

6 SO 424 (3)

7 SO 1105 (2) (i)

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re-invitation or entering stationing. There is a responsibility to assist the presbyter in reflecting on how God has graced them for service, and what shape that service might take, and to discern with the presbyter appointments in which God will use them. There is also a need to consider pastorally the impact of stationing on the presbyter, and on members of the presbyter's household and discern what are the prevailing factors that will direct or affect the decision to seek to remain in an appointment or explore a new one. There is also an increasing need to be particularly mindful of the needs of the whole household, rather than isolate them from the presbyter in the process, or worse to disregard them.

- 3.11 Alongside the Warden of the Order, Chairs have a role in attentive listening to and support for deacons in their District as they explore the development of their call and questions of re-invitation and stationing. Similar questions as to impact and household are raised.
- 3.12 In respect of the Circuits, Chairs, with lay stationing reps, listen to deepen their understanding of opportunity, need and context, that they might properly interpret those for the stationing process and seek to serve the pastoral, missional, and strategic direction of the Circuits under their oversight.
- 3.13 While at one level, Chairs, like other presbyters, are stationed to exercise pastoral ministry over a particular area, for Chairs the role is always explicitly connexional and includes a focus on both their particular area and the Connexion more widely. It is the ministry of the Chair to hold these concerns together and to be among the people of their District as those who hold this vision together: near enough to know people, communities, churches and Circuits; distant enough to see the big picture and to hold the concerns of vision and direction. In this Chairs exercise a key ministry of oversight which is connexional and yet rooted in the local.

4. Evolving roles and teams for shared oversight

- 4.1 The changing size and nature of Districts entail changes in the way these various forms of oversight are exercised, by the Chair and by the various colleagues and teams with which Chairs work. The report to the 2022 Conference, *Oversight Trusteeship and Leadership*, noted that, 'the reduction in Districts and new ways of expressing district leadership have implications for the role of the District Chair,' and 'recommends that questions about the oversight role of the District Chair are given urgent attention alongside continuing reflection on District leadership.'⁸

8 *Oversight Trusteeship and Leadership* (2022), sect 6.5

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- 4.2 Larger Districts necessitate a more focused and intentional sharing of oversight, and this is to be welcomed and encouraged. It has been noted previously that problems can ensue when District Chairs attempt to take on too much responsibility for oversight themselves:

That can result in Chairs being given notional authority and power and many responsibilities, but no means of fulfilling those responsibilities except by doing everything themselves. In other cases Chairs who have a lot of energy and personal charisma may be able to force through their own opinions. All of this can be a cause of stress and breakdown in the Chair, District or wider Connexion. It is important to find ways in which there can be a proper exercise of the shared nature of oversight as a means of seeking to prevent this.⁹

- 4.3 New proposals for larger Districts are generating a number of models for sharing oversight, all of which have merit and, in principle, greater sharing in this way is beneficial. This increased sharing of oversight amongst various District structures opens the question of when the District Chair's direct engagement is necessary for shared oversight to function as such. With an increased number of focal points for shared oversight in larger Districts (eg two or more distinct geographical areas in which oversight can be focused), it is apparent that the District Chair cannot be present sufficiently in all situations. Several other roles have become (or are becoming) important in the life of Districts to support the Chair's role in the ministry of oversight. These include Deputy Chairs and Assistant Chairs, and we note a role of District Secretary being proposed in some contexts. There are other contexts in which a number of Chairs are working as a team, including single Districts with multiple Chairs and two or more Districts sharing two or more Chairs.
- 4.4 The diversity of arrangements raises questions about the nature of shared oversight and of the role of the District Chair within that:
- What of a Chair's role is distinctively associated with presbyteral ministry, and so might only be delegated to a presbyter?
 - What is the difference between Chairs, Deputies and Assistants, and other roles, and how should this be clarified?
 - What oversight tasks might Chairs appropriately delegate to others?

⁹ *What is a District Chair*, sect. 33

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5. **What of a Chair's role is distinctively associated with presbyteral ministry, and so might only be shared with a presbyter?**

5.1 The ways in which the role of District Chair is a presbyteral role are explored thoroughly in *What is a District Chair*¹⁰ and this continues to reflect Methodist theology and practice.

5.2 In one sense, as presbyters, Chairs are connexional people representing the oversight of the Conference¹¹ and like other presbyters are called to 'stand in the gap' 'represent[ing] God-in-Christ and the community of the church in the world' and 'the world and the community of the church in Christ before God.'¹² In the current configuration of the role, Chairs stand as an interface between the Church connexionally and the Church more locally: by no means the only such interface but a significant one nonetheless. The 1956 report cited in *What is a District Chair* named it in this way:

[Chairs] would have to speak for the Districts and Circuits at a connexional level and speak to the Districts and Circuits on behalf of the Church as a whole

5.3 As presbyters, Chairs share with other presbyters in a specific form of ordained ministry. In the terms of Clause 4, Deed of Union:

Christ's ministers in the church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this occupation as presbyters or deacons. Presbyters have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls.

5.4 In common with all ministers, Chairs then have the responsibility of being stewards in God's household and shepherding the flock. As presbyters, they have a principal and directing part in these duties and thus to take responsibility to advance the mission of the Church within their Districts and to further the work of God is a way in which they fulfil the duties laid upon them as presbyters.

5.5 Larger Districts result in roles previously exercised by an individual Chair now requiring support from other appropriate people. Some of these are particular

10 sections 34-55

11 *What is a Presbyter*, para. 10

12 *What is a Presbyter*, para 4

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focal points of the presbyteral ministry exercised by the Chair, and so deputising should be reserved to presbyters. These include:

- i. Presiding at services of Holy Communion at which the Chair would normally preside because of their particular representative role.¹³
- ii. Pastoral responsibility is exercised by Chairs for the whole District, but they are 'specifically charged with responsibility for the pastoral oversight of the ministers, deacons and probationers in the District'¹⁴ and thus to act as 'pastor to the ministers and probationers.'¹⁵ There is an analogy here with the way the presbyters have pastoral charge for local churches, but exercise this charge through pastoral responsibility which is shared with the church council and/or pastoral committee. Being 'specifically charged' does not mean that the Chair must carry out all associated pastoral care themselves. The Chair may exercise the charge by sharing pastoral responsibility with other presbyters, primarily with Superintendents,¹⁶ and in some situations with Deputy Chairs. This shared pastoral responsibility, alongside mutual support and accountability is expressed through the gathering of the Presbyteral Session of Synod by the Chair,¹⁷ and so similarly this can only be deputised to another presbyter.

- 5.6 Many tasks usually undertaken by Chairs are not required to be done by a presbyter in particular. For example, Chairs often represent the District in regional ecumenical fora and encourage mutual relationships with other church leaders, many of whom are usually also ordained. Whilst there is often a helpful symmetry of relationship between ordained people in these situations, the ecumenical activity is not always one which in the understanding of the Methodist Church is possible only for a presbyter. For an appropriate lay person from within the leadership structures of the District (eg a lay person appointed as District Ecumenical Officer) to represent the Chair at a suitable ecumenical situation is a fitting and helpful representation of Methodist faith and order. However, situations and contexts vary, and Districts should weigh carefully the way that ecumenical and civic relationships might best be developed when considering appropriate arrangements for people to carry out roles which might otherwise have been fulfilled by the Chair or another presbyter.

13 *What is a District Chair*, sect 34

14 *What is a District Chair*, sect 43

15 SO 424 (1)

16 SO 701 (10) states that 'District Chairs are appointed to give leadership and have care of the life of the Church in the District, and in particular to have care of the ministers and probationers. The pastoral charge of each Circuit remains, however, with the Superintendent and other presbyters appointed to it' and SO 701 (9) states that 'Superintendents [...] have oversight of all the ministers and probationers stationed in the Circuit.'

17 *What is a District Chair*, sect 23

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5.7 For a Chair to share aspects of their role with other presbyters can also be an important expression of the way in which the role of Chair does not constitute a third order of ministry in Methodism. An increased intentional sharing of oversight from Chairs to other appropriate presbyters, prompted by larger Districts, might be a helpful opportunity to renew exploration of this aspect of Methodist faith and order.

6. **What is the difference between Chairs, Deputies and Assistants, and other roles, and how should this be clarified?**

6.1 SO 426 details the current provisions for the appointment of Permanent Deputies, Temporary Deputies and how 'a Chair may at any time appoint a person to assist him or her in such way as he or she may think fit'.¹⁸ The key difference between deputies and persons appoint to assist is that deputies can only be presbyters, whilst those assisting can be any person. There is also a distinction in appointment process: Chairs can appoint people to assist, whereas deputies are appointed by the Synod. However, appointments of people to assist also require the approval of Synod or District Policy Committee if they are to 'act publicly on behalf of the Chair'.¹⁹ Whilst those appointed to assist can be any person, 'assistant' roles with delegation to act publicly on behalf of the Chair are often carried out by presbyters. The terminology could be employed in a clearer way if 'assistant' roles with delegation to act publicly on behalf of the Chair were reserved for lay people or deacons, and (as is already the case) deputy roles for presbyters. This would recognise and represent the way that there are particular aspects of the Chair role which are solely presbyteral, but also that the oversight exercised by the Chair is best shared where possible with lay people and deacons.

6.2 The *Deed of Union* makes provision for each District to have at least one Chair,²⁰ and the means, if a District has more than one Chair, to decide which Chair is specified when referred to in the Deed or Standing Orders.²¹ Some Districts currently have more than one Chair and in some contexts more than one Chair is appointed to more than one District. This represents a distinct model alongside sharing oversight through the appointed of deputy and assistant roles.

6.3 The difference between multiple Chairs and Deputy Chairs is that if a District has multiple Chairs they are all appointed by the Conference, whereas Deputy Chairs

18 SO 426 (6)

19 SO 426 (6) (ii)

20 *Deed of Union*, sect 42(a)

21 *Deed of Union*, sect 42(e)

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are appointed by the relevant Synod. There is a consequent variety of practice with regards to the relationship between deputy or 'assistant' Chair appointments and stationing procedures. Some presbyteral stations in the Circuits have included an expectation that the presbyter will also be appointed as assistant or Deputy Chair, whereas other appointments are made separately from the stationing process. Given the growing significance of Deputy Chair roles in larger Districts it could be beneficial to include such roles in stationing procedures, in a way similar to superintendencies. It may also be helpful to consider the inclusion of roles assisting the Chair within diaconal stations (which would also require conversation with the Warden of the Diaconal Order). Cooperation between Circuits and Districts when designing these stations ought to be in place as good practice anyway, for example, for the appointment of Deputy Chairs by Synod separately from the stationing process. The relationship between a presbyter's role in a Circuit and as a Deputy Chair should be clarified within the letter of understanding for that station (which should be amended if the appointment to Deputy Chair is made within the period of the station). It is noticeable that stationing profiles often seem to describe the role of a Deputy Chair, with the job title of 'assistant Chair'. Districts should be clear about what, in practice, the role entails, and should ensure that it complies with the relevant Standing Orders. We are aware, however, of some anomalies which may make this more complicated. In particular, under SO 426(2)(iii), Deputy Chairs can be appointed only for a period of three years in the first instance, which does not relate easily to the five years usually expected of a station to a Circuit.

- 6.4 As one example of how district structures are developing, some merging Districts (eg the new North West England and West Midlands Districts) are proposing the appointment of one or more District Secretaries, 'mirroring the connexional role of the Connexional Secretary, co-ordinating and where appropriate managing the district staff.'²² They propose that this could be a lay or ordained person, employed or stationed. The relationship between the District Secretary and the District Chair is as yet unexplored and may need fuller theological consideration of the implications for faith and order, including attention to the relationship between the continuing roles of the Secretary of the Representative Synod and the Secretary of the Presbyteral Synod, and any new role of District Secretary. As new district roles are explored, Districts should consider these issues carefully.
- 6.5 We do not think it appropriate to prescribe a precise structure for sharing the ministry of the Chair and believe that flexibility will be necessary for our present

22 *Report from the Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District on a proposed amalgamation of the two Districts MC/23/71, sect 5.1*

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situation. Nevertheless, we do recommend that the position of Deputies and those appointed to assist the Chair be clarified and that provision is needed to allow the development of appropriate senior leadership within Districts.

7. What oversight tasks might Chairs appropriately share with others?

7.1 The primary role of the Chair is to ensure that communal and collegial oversight is exercised well in the District. This entails the Chair's personal oversight of some matters, but more importantly requires the coordination of collaborative working within the District's structures. It is to be expected and encouraged that many of the tasks which constitute oversight are not carried out directly by the Chair and all Districts have some form of structures and arrangements to facilitate this.

7.2 Both established and evolving district structures devolve oversight tasks to Deputy Chairs, assistant Chairs, other officers of the District (eg Synod Secretaries, Lay Stationing Representatives etc), and as discussed above, potentially also other roles such as district Secretaries. That the Chair personally needs to be able to discern the difference between the various aspects of oversight, and to exercise and share them with care, is thoroughly discussed and detailed in the *What is a District Chair* report.²³ The Chair has a leading role in helping the district structures to decide how to share in oversight, and regardless of the agreed shape of this,

'The Chair of District also has a vital role to play in ensuring that the lay officers, deacons, presbyters and formal bodies in the District all exercise their complementary roles and share appropriately in the exercise of oversight of the Church's life, work and mission in the District and its constituent Circuits, churches and institutions, and in the wider society in which they are placed.'²⁴

7.3 Whilst this all continues to be relevant to the role of the Chair, attention needs to be paid to the changing context of the church. As Districts get bigger geographically, they will need to take decisions as to which tasks of oversight previously exercised personally by Chairs will now instead be shared and/or deputised to other officers. This might include geographical separation of tasks (eg Deputy Chairs and/or those appointed to assist the Chair) with particular geographical areas in which to relate with ecumenical partners and civil society),

²³ *What is a District Chair*, sects 23-26

²⁴ *What is a District Chair*, sect 26

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and also separation of governance and managerial tasks (eg the management of district staff being the responsibility of officers other than the Chair, eg Deputy Chairs, those appointed to assist the Chair(s), District Secretaries or other officers). The pressing question therefore might not be about what tasks can be helpfully done by people other than the Chair, but rather what should remain the focus of the Chair if other tasks are delegated and shared.

- 7.4 The *What is a District Chair* report states that, 'Oversight is a means of ensuring that a movement or church remains true to its nature and purpose as it grows and develops and as its context changes.'²⁵ This is of pressing importance as the Methodist Church undergoes significant change and decline. Though growth was envisaged in 2006, overall decline has continued. The *God for All Strategy*, building on previous learning since 2006 is now the primary means by which the Methodist Church is fostering new developments and proclaiming the gospel in new ways. As the shapes and structures of Districts are re-shaped, it is important to ensure that new structures enable the church to remain true to its nature and purpose: in the broad work of leadership and vision as well as in the care of more detailed tasks of management and governance. Leadership structures should allow this to be appropriately shared so that the oversight of the District is properly exercised in every respect.
- 7.5 The 2022 statement on *Ministry in the Methodist Church* warns against allowing the description of oversight as constituting 'governance, management and leadership'²⁶ to lead to 'the development of a rather narrow and functional understanding of oversight.'²⁷ Instead, oversight is described like this:
- 'Oversight is the function of ensuring that the Church is true to its calling. It involves "the process of reflecting on experience in order to discern the presence and activity of God in the world." It has always been necessary to the life of the Church, and a key feature of that oversight is ensuring the continuity of the Church in apostolic faith and mission. In the Methodist Church that continuity is located in the Conference.'²⁸
- 7.6 As the key representative of the Conference in the District, the focus of the Chair could be on 'ensuring the continuity of the Church in apostolic faith and mission'. Releasing Chairs from some tasks should be encouraged, in order to allow focus on this primary central task of oversight. An enhanced missional focus for the

25 *What is a District Chair*, sect 17

26 The Methodist Church, 2005, *The Nature of Oversight*, 1.8-1.13

27 *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 6.2

28 *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 6.1

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Chair could be a clear benefit of larger Districts being able to organise shared oversight in new ways.

8. The role of the Chair beyond their District

8.1 The Deed of Union, Standing Orders and *What is a District Chair* all say much more about a Chair's role in their District than they do about it as a broader connexional role. There is much about the connexional aspect of it that appears to have arisen or developed rather than being conscious choice. That itself is a cause for reflection and in considering the connexional role of a Chair of District we might consider the ways in which this development has responded to the needs of the Church.

8.2 The report *What is a District Chair* noted:

Connexional issues have increasingly meant that Chairs collectively and individually have had tasks to perform beyond their work in their Districts. For example, all the Chairs are members of the Connexional Leadership Team (together with the General Secretary/Secretary of Conference and the Co-ordinating Secretaries; the past, present and designated President and Vice-President; the Warden of the Diaconal Order; and the Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee) which meets to confer, articulate vision and thereby offer leadership to the Church, and which from September 2006 will offer a report on their conferring to the Methodist Council. They have also belonged to a Chairs' Meeting, in which they have dealt with matters of common concern and which, because of the particular knowledge and experience which they bring to it, has been consulted from time to time by the Conference or the Methodist Council about matters of connexional policy and practice. Furthermore, together with a few connexional officers they constitute the Stationing Matching Group which plays a key role in the stationing matching processes.

8.3 Chairs' roles beyond their own District that are named in our discipline include membership of the Conference, responsibilities of stationing and the Connexional Leaders' Forum and Chairs' Meeting. In addition to this there is a number of connexional responsibilities which are resourced by the District Chairs. In some cases, this is because our discipline requires it; in other cases it occurs through well-established custom, no doubt because it has been found to be a useful way of proceeding. Where someone familiar with connexional processes and well-connected with people across the Connexion is needed, it is unsurprising that among the Chairs has been a common place to look. As patterns of district structure, and consequently numbers of Chairs available change, it is necessary

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to consider this again. At the same time, our commitment to broadening participation encourages us to recognise that others can also bring relevant gifts and experience to such roles. As with all ministers, in some cases a Chair may take on a connexional role connected to their specific gifts and interests and we should in those cases make sure not to create a precedent that their successor in that connexional role must be a Chair. We suggest that those considering recruiting Chairs to specific connexional responsibilities consider:

Where is it necessary to have a Chair? This may be because Standing Orders require it or because the specific nature of the role means only a Chair is able to fulfil it.

Where is it useful to have a Chair because they are a Chair? By virtue of holding the role of Chair, there may be a specific contribution that can be made. However, consideration should be given as to whether there may be others who could make that contribution.

Where might a Chair undertake this role because they have specific gifts or interest? It is good for all ministers to be able to have areas of specialism within their overall ministry.

- 8.4 One aspect of the connexional character of the role of a District Chair could be traced back to their appointment. While all ministers are stationed by the Conference, District Chairs are elected by the Conference to serve in this role.²⁹ This is in contrast to the earlier days of Methodism when Chairmen (sic) were elected by their Districts. In provisions for the Connexional Leaders' Forum, Standing Orders provide that leaders appointed by the Conference shall work together collegially in the oversight of the whole church. It is important to note that this is not limited to District Chairs but they are a significant such category of leaders. Although this Standing Order was suspended by the Conference of 2023 to allow consideration of other models, it is suggested that the principle of shared oversight remains fundamental. The Conference itself is the most powerful and significant expression of this and Chairs appointed by the Conference are called, with others, to embody this principle within their connexional ministry. The oversight offered by Chairs is never isolated from the rest of the Connexion and while each will have their distinctive approach to their ministry, it remains a ministry to be exercised on behalf of the Conference and connected to the wider church.

²⁹ *Deed of Union*, 42

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- 8.5 Chairs as a group do not have a fundamentally different role within the Conference from any other members of the Conference. However, the nature of their role more broadly implies a degree of collegiality around specific duties, most notably those connected to the Conference's act of stationing. Alongside this, they contribute to the Conference's discernment across the full range of its concern, bringing insights from their District (along with the representatives elected by the Synod) as well as broader connexional concerns. In a smaller Conference, and as Conference-elected representatives are phased out, they have a particular opportunity to contribute to the Conference's institutional memory.
- 8.6 Like all presbyters, Chairs are called to have a vision wider than simply the immediate context of the ministry to which they have been appointed. However, the nature of the role means that this will always have particular and concrete expression in ways it may not always have for other presbyters. Chairs are called publicly and visibly to hold together the connexional nature of the church with its commitment to the local: in the courts of the church, together with presbyters, deacons and lay people across the Connexion and in the churches and Circuits of their District.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 The committee recognises that we are in a time of change and development, much of which will be organic and exploratory, alongside more strategically planned work. It therefore does not believe this is the time for a fundamental re-casting of our understanding of the role of a District Chair. The reflection offered here seeks to situate that understanding in the light of our current context and the committee hopes it will aid Districts and others as they consider their structures and ways of working.
- 9.2 The committee believes that the current provisions regarding Deputy Chairs and those who assist the Chair need amendment for clarification and to provide appropriate flexibility for a situation that will have a wide variety of District structures. We propose that the role of Deputy Chair should remain a presbyteral role, able to deputise for the Chair and more widely to share in the Chair's ministry, including in those aspects which require the ministry of a presbyter. Further consideration should be given to the possibility of deputising for the Chair in the Conference and other connexional gatherings and to the implications of that for the mode of appointment and reinvitation of a Deputy Chair. Although the term Assistant Chair is widely used, it is not found in the current Standing Order. At the same time, others see it as a problematic term which limits such a ministry or creates confusion with the role of Deputy Chair. We propose that there should be the possibility for Districts to appoint persons to share with the Chair

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in the leadership of the District, without formally deputising for them. This would then include deacons and lay people, and could also include presbyters who would not be deputies. Such persons would share in the public ministry of the Chair and in the oversight of the district (except for those things which are formal acts of deputisation) and could have specific areas of responsibility delegated to them. All of these roles should normally be appointed by the Synod (but see the consideration of stationing below) and provided with an appropriate role description. The existing ability of the Chair to appoint any person to assist them more generally should be retained (although it may not be necessary to enshrine this in the Standing Order) and the language of 'supporting the ministry of the Chair' would seem appropriate to us.

- 9.3 In the case of ministers, we recommend that further consideration be given to whether Deputy Chairs and others who share in the leadership of the District (as described in paragraph 9.2) should be able to be appointed through the stationing matching process or whether they should only be appointed from those already stationed in the District and to the relevant adaptations to those processes, if necessary. Further we recommend consideration be given to the circumstances (if any) in which such roles may be appointed by advertisement.
- 9.4 Work on changes to the relevant Standing Orders about sharing in the leadership of the District has been undertaken by the Oversight and Trusteeship Task Group, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, and will be presented elsewhere in the agenda.

*****RESOLUTION**

- 28/1. The Conference receives the Report.**