

## Accessibility to the Conference

### Interim report of Working Party to the Methodist Council, January 2015

#### Basic Information

<b>Contact Name and Details</b>	John Bell (johnabell@supanet.com) Sam Taylor (samuel_p_taylor@yahoo.co.uk) Co-chairs of the Working Party
<b>Status of Paper</b>	Interim report
<b>Action Required</b>	Discussion, with an encouragement to Council members to offer comments and their own suggestions to the Working Party
<b>Draft Resolutions</b>	None

#### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and Aims</b>	This interim report responds to the resolution of the Council in paper MC/14/45 on the subject of the accessibility of the Conference. It is intended to submit the final report to the April meeting of the Council en route to the 2015 Conference.
<b>Main Points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility to the Conference – who attends and for how long?</li> <li>• Preparation for the Conference – what can be done beforehand?</li> <li>• At the Conference – how can more people participate more effectively?</li> </ul>
<b>Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)</b>	Notice of Motion 208 (2013): Accessibility to the Conference MC/14/45 – appointed the working party [shown as Appendix 1]
<b>Consultations</b>	It is planned to conduct a brief survey of the 2014 Conference representatives in January and to consult with the EDI forum, as requested in NoM 208 (2013)

## **Accessibility to the Conference**

### **Interim report of Working Party to the Methodist Council, January 2015**

#### **1. Background**

- 1.1 The April 2014 meeting of the Methodist Council approved the establishment of a Working Party (WP) to address the matter of accessibility to the Conference: see appendix 1 for the Council paper MC/14/45.
- 1.2 The WP has met twice and brings this interim report for the January 2015 Council's consideration, and specifically a request to that Council members spend a short time in buzz groups reflecting on the ideas proposed and any others they wish to suggest.
- 1.3 For clarification, the WP ascertained from the proposers of the Notice of Motion at the Conference of 2013 what they meant by 'accessibility'. It was verified that it is not physical access or incapacity provision but how to enable all Conference members, not least those attending for the first (and perhaps only) time, to engage in its agenda and proceedings in a more participative and purposeful way. The observation has been made that a relatively few members can dominate Conference debates – not that their wisdom is unwelcome – and new members can find the whole experience somewhat overwhelming, beginning with a 600-page Agenda a few weeks' beforehand.

#### **2. Previous Conference reviews**

The WP read the reports of various groups which have reviewed the Conference since 2004, noting that the substantive reports relevant to its remit were in 2005<sup>1</sup> and 2006<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, it became apparent that many of the issues the WP discussed had been covered by the 2006 report, though not all of its recommendations have been wholly achieved, as will be outlined below. We are indebted to the work of our predecessors and seek to reinforce many of their recommendations.

#### **3. Participation in the Conference**

- 3.1 The WP acknowledges that not everyone can speak on every item of Conference business and that many people participate thoughtfully but silently in its proceedings. Members often come carefully prepared to contribute to debates, only to hear 'their speech' made by someone else first. Some items of business stimulate great interest and attract long queues of willing and waiting speakers whilst others go through, on the nod, without comment.
- 3.2 The 2013 Notice of Motion expressed the conviction that, in the maelstrom of the purposes and constraints of the Conference, there is a frustration amongst many members that they are unable to participate effectively, do not always understand what is happening, thereby feel disenfranchised and wonder why they came. Some find public speaking difficult at the best of times, let alone in the cut and thrust of a hurried Conference debate. People have different styles of engagement and learning and may find the established culture of the Conference daunting and even alien at first.

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<sup>1</sup> Conference 2005 Agenda item 7, pages 146 to 156.

<sup>2</sup> Conference 2006 Agenda item 41, pages 317 to 352.

3.3 The WP acknowledges that there are twin goals, not always easily aligned, as the Conference prosecutes its business: first, to deal with the content of business to reach decisions or outcomes and secondly, to enable members to confer and contribute through participative processes.

3.4 With the premise that there is scope for improvement and building on the previous reviews and recommendations, the WP offers the following areas for reflection and invites the Council's input as a steer towards its final report. There are three main headings:

- Accessibility to the Conference – who attends and for how long?
- Preparation for the Conference – what can be done beforehand?
- At the Conference – how can more people participate more effectively?

#### **4. Accessibility to the Conference – who attends and for how long?**

##### **4.1 Who attends?**

The Conference is rightly equally balanced between lay and ordained members, and the latter generally have no constraints on their availability to attend if they wish and are elected. It hardly needs an accurate analysis to indicate that the average age of ordained members is rather less than that of lay members and it may be suggested that the latter reflects the wider membership of the church. Nonetheless, it is highly probable that many lay people of working age simply cannot commit time from work which, unless they have a generous employer, eats up at least four/five days of their annual holiday entitlement.

The WP sketched out the possibility of the Conference meeting from Friday morning to Monday evening, thereby reducing time commitment to a long weekend, but recognised the extensive consequences of such an innovation. However, we do not wish to waste time on a non-starter.

**The Council is therefore asked to indicate whether this is an option that the WP should pursue in more detail.**

##### **4.2 For how long?**

SO 417 governs the election of District representatives to the Conference and SO 105(6) explains how representatives may be elected for one, two or three years. It is noted that the nine Conference-elected representatives are elected for three years.

The WP suggests that encouraging more people to attend for three (or even two) years would render their contribution to the Conference more effective whilst being aware of the possible drawbacks of reducing the number of different people attending and militating against lay working people because of time commitment.

**The Council is asked to reflect on the suggestion that three years become the norm rather than the exception.**

#### **5. Preparation for the Conference – what can be done beforehand?**

##### **5.1 District meetings**

The WP is aware that Districts arrange pre-Conference briefing meetings for those attending (as directed by SO 417(5)), and WP members reflected (from their own experiences) that these helpful events vary in format, perhaps seem rather too optional and often exclude

Conference members who are not District representatives<sup>3</sup> (such as Conference-elected, Youth, Racial Justice, Conference officers etc). We are not being critical of what is offered or achieved.

The WP suggests that the District briefing meetings should aim to enable the Conference to be more accessible to all those attending, and might:

- a. Be more formal, covering the procedures and ways of working of the Conference as well as Agenda subjects;
- b. Be regarded as a compulsory element of attending the Conference – so that the aficionados who do not need them as induction can impart their knowledge and experience (maybe give formal input);
- c. Include all Conference members resident or stationed<sup>3</sup> in the District, not just the elected District representatives;
- d. Be allocated sufficient time to achieve their objective.

**The Council is asked to indicate its view on strengthening the District briefings along these lines, and to offer any further suggestions.**

## 5.2 On-line forums

The WP quotes paragraph 9 of the 2006 review.

‘A Conference website and other facilities be set up to provide facilities for members of the Conference to discuss items of business and other matters of concern with each other in advance of the Conference, and then provide material to help representatives disseminate the news and thinking of the Conference after it has met’: this would be for Conference members only 6 months before and after it meets.

It is recalled that this facility was started in 2007, ran for about three years, but by 2010 was little used by few people and has not since been re-instated. Its administration was also labour-intensive for Connexional Team staff and it relied on authors of Agenda reports actively responding to comments and queries (which, we believe, was also patchy).

The WP recognises that in the intervening eight years the use of electronic communications (not least social media<sup>4</sup>) has grown rapidly and that some form of on-line forum may now be welcomed and more readily adopted. It would be a private forum for Conference members only. The WP is seeking estimates of cost.

The WP is also considering whether this facility should be retained during the Conference so that members who are not inclined to speak may enable their views to be heard by others.

**The Council is asked to reflect whether a renewed attempt to launch this facility would seem helpful and timely.**

## 5.3 Webinar idea

The WP suggests that a webinar, using Skype technology, could be set up to enable first-time Conference attendees to be briefed and is enquiring of the IT team in Methodist Church

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, SO 417(5) specifically says ‘district representatives’.

<sup>4</sup> The WP notes that there is extensive sharing of views amongst some Conference members on the public social media facilities, over which the Conference has no control or authority.

House whether this is possible. Clearly it requires participants to have the necessary technology. It is understood that the webinar facility is widely used in distance-learning circles.

#### **5.4 Conference Agenda**

The WP recognises that the cover sheet at the beginning of each Agenda item is a most helpful innovation, but further suggests that its importance is emphasised to authors, and that the 'Summary of Contents' section be as full as necessary when the subject matter is of major importance in the life of the Church.

### **6. At the Conference – how can more people participate more effectively?**

#### **6.1 Initial briefings for new Conference members**

For many years, briefing sessions were arranged for new Conference members, usually on the Saturday morning. Whilst a worthy objective, it became fraught with difficulties which included (1) the convenience of travel to the Conference venue and shared travel arrangements, (2) the relative location of the Conference hall and accommodation, (3) the start time of the Conference and (4) the other preparatory activities which must take precedence on Saturday mornings.

The briefings have been temporarily abandoned and it is suggested that, rather than seek to re-instate them, their function be assumed by the District briefing meetings discussed in section 5.1 and/or offered through a webinar facility, as in section 5.3.

**The Council is asked to indicate its view on this suggestion.**

#### **6.2 First-time speaker card**

The WP believes the first-time speaker card to be extremely positive. It is suggested that all first-time speakers are always given priority once an item of business has been introduced and that their speech allocation is never shortened. Greater publicity can be given to this arrangement at the beginning of the Conference.

#### **6.3 Assistance with preparation of Notices of Motion**

The WP values the offer made by certain individuals to assist in preparation of Notices of Motion, but again suggests that it be advertised more prominently at the start of the Conference and made known in the District briefing meetings.

#### **6.4 Planned debates**

Speakers in debates in the Church of England General Synod must seek approval to do so, submit their main points beforehand and, if selected to speak, stick to their script. The WP does not believe this is a helpful model for general application at the Methodist Conference, but does suggest that (as paragraph 14 in the 2006 review did), for major debates and to ensure a balanced spectrum of views can be heard, some form of prior debate planning would be useful. The 2006 recommendation has been rarely invoked and the WP suggests that it could be.

#### **6.5 Hearings**

The 2006 review made three recommendations about the Conference meeting in different formats, viz. Hearings, Workshops and Reference Groups. Each has been used since, perhaps not as much as might have been possible and not always strictly for the purpose intended.

In paragraph 12 (of the 2006 review), preliminary Hearings, on a day prior to the debate, were suggested as a means of enabling authors of major or controversial reports to answer questions of detail and fact in order to facilitate members' understanding of the issues. These

are similar to the Login sessions used at 3Generate. Noting that suggestions by the Conference Business Committee in recent years to report authors to have Hearings have been declined, it is suggested that as much use should be made of these as possible and that they could be run in parallel.

## **6.6 Workshops**

Paragraph 11 of the 2006 review recommended workshops for the 'mutual exploration and open-ended discernment of matters for which there is no report or set of resolutions in the formal agenda'. They were used, for example, in 2007 when the Stationing Review Project was half-way through its work in order to test the mind of Conference on various suggestions, and enabled Conference members to engage in smaller groups on focused issues. Some feedback indicates that, more recently, workshops have been less well received because presenters' speeches lasted too long or the subject matter appeared unrelated to any business of the Conference.

The WP believes that workshops, properly planned and managed, can enable more Conference members to feel engaged in its business.

## **6.7 Reference Groups**

Paragraph 13 of the 2006 review introduced parallel Reference Groups to work on specialised topics which do not interest all members. In 2011, these became parallel sessions of the Conference, chaired by an ex-President or ex-VP. The intention is that the resolutions of these Groups are adopted by the full Conference *en bloc*. Not only does this save time, but because the Groups are smaller and less intimidating, they encourage more participation. The drawback is finding enough members of the Secretariat to staff them.

The WP believes that, where appropriate and practical, such Groups present opportunities for increased involvement and conferring.

**The Council is invited to offer any feedback on the sections 6.4 to 6.7.**

## **6.8 Electronic voting**

The Conference of 2011 used electronic voting for some of its debate votes. It was decided by the Conference Business Committee (CBC) and Conference Planning Executive (CPE) afterwards not to repeat the practice until further notice, basically as the costs, it was then judged, outweighed the benefits. That may still be the case, as there are usually very few close call votes. The significant benefit is that a secret vote enables people more readily to express their view and not be influenced by those around them whom they may perceive as opinion-shapers.

The WP suggests that it is not the body to pursue this matter, but raises it as relevant to its remit.

**The Council may wish to refer the matter to the CPE or CBC for further consideration.**

## **7. Questionnaire**

The WP is conducting a survey of opinion of members of the 2014 Conference to ascertain their experience of participation and gather suggestions for improvement.

## **Appendix**

### **Working Party to consider the accessibility of the Conference**

**MC/14/45**

The 2013 Conference passed the following motion:

Notice of Motion 208

The Conference confers every year around issues that are important to the church and to the society within which we live. Therefore, it is important that people from all parts of the church are able to engage in the way the Conference does its business and can engage in these issues.

The Conference recognises there is work to be done to improve the accessibility of the Conference, making use of the learning in the field of participation which has taken place over the past five years, and taking into account the full breadth of traditions, cultures and ages within the church.

The Conference directs the Methodist Council to appoint a working party to consider, in consultation with the EDI Stakeholder Forum, ways of making the Conference more accessible and to report to the Conference in 2015 with any recommendations for how accessibility to the Conference could be improved.

The Council is asked to appoint the following as members of the working party;

Co Chairs: Mr John A Bell (Former Vice-President and Chair of the Conference Business Committee)

Mr Sam Taylor (Proposer of the Notice of Motion)

The Revd Ashley R Cooper (Member of the Conference Business Committee)

The Revd Jennifer M Dyer (Journal Secretary)

Ms Tamara Wray (Youth President)

Resolution 45/1.

The Council appoints the working party as set out in the report.