

Research Response to NoM 2015/204 ‘Impact of Mapping A Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission’

| | |
|--|--|
| Contact Name and Details | Stephen Skuce – Director of Scholarship, Research and Innovation skuces@methodistchurch.org.uk ; Alan Piggot piggota@methodistchurch.org.uk ; Hamish Leese leeseh@methodistchurch.org.uk |
| Status of Paper | Final |
| Action Required | To be received |
| Draft Resolutions | 37/1. The Council receives the report. |
| Alternative Options to Consider, if Any | N/A |

Summary of Content

| | |
|--|--|
| Subject and Aims | To report on the first stage of research into the impact of Regrouping for Mission (RfM), clarifying its extent and offering evidence based recommendations for further research. |
| Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function) | This paper is a response to NOM 2015/204 and based on MC/15/96. Documents consulted included <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Secretary’s Report to the 2007 Conference; • MC/11/10 <i>Regrouping for Mission</i>: Report to Methodist Council January 2011 • ‘District Development Enablers Project Review’ <i>Report from Hilary Barnard and Irene MacWilliam, MacWilliam Consulting</i>. Review (December 2011). |
| Main Points | Introduction Definition of a Large Circuit Extent of RfM Change and Growth Emerging Themes Factors that Impact Very Large Circuits Stage Two Research |
| Consultations | Quantitative research undertaken with Chairs, with a sample of Superintendents and Senior Circuit Stewards; qualitative research undertaken with six circuits; analysis of <i>Statistics for Mission</i> . |

Research Response to NoM 2015/204 'Impact of Mapping A Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission'

NoM 2015/204 from the Methodist Conference 2015 says:

The Conference:

- *notes with appreciation the significant impact the initiative of Mapping the Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission has had on the life of the Methodist Church for almost a decade – helping Circuits to review their readiness for mission and the structures needed to facilitate that mission;*
- *notes that a significant consequence of this work has been the reconfiguring of many Circuit;*
- *recognises that there are many anecdotes as to the perceived positive and negative effects of such reconfigurations for both large and small Circuits;*

However there has never been any quantitative or qualitative research into the impact and effect of Mapping the Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission for the mission of the Church. Given that the process has now been underway for almost a decade the Conference is of the view that the time for a formal research project examining the evidence would be extremely helpful to the Church as it continues to reshape for effective mission in the twenty-first century.

The Conference therefore directs the Methodist Council to make arrangements for and oversee such research and report its findings to the Conference of 2016. This may be an interim report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Under direction of MC/15/96, the Strategic Research Team in the Connexional Team has undertaken research between October 2015 and March 2016 to seek to provide 'a clear definition of a "large" circuit and identify how many exist over the Connexion. It will plainly set out the amount of reconfiguration that has occurred and where it has occurred geographically and contextually and point to some of the consequences of that reconfiguration.'
- 1.2 To achieve this, membership and other data, collected from churches and circuits via the annual statistics returns round, has been used to quantify the extent of change associated with *Regrouping for Mission* (RfM); report on the current size of circuits following reorganisation; and explore the basic dynamics and ratios relating to ministry deployment. Secondly, questionnaire research has engaged with all those who are or had been a District Chair since 2008, and to approximately one third of superintendents and senior circuit stewards. Thirdly, six case studies were conducted to test the emerging insights from the statistical and questionnaire research. Using three sources of insight and triangulating the findings enables robust research insights to emerge. The full research report, including methodology, is available from Jane Bates (batesj@methodistchurch.org.uk).

2. Defining a Large Circuit

- 2.1 Various ways to distinguish size were considered, including number of congregations, circuit deployment and other staffing, numbers of churches, or a combination of two or more such

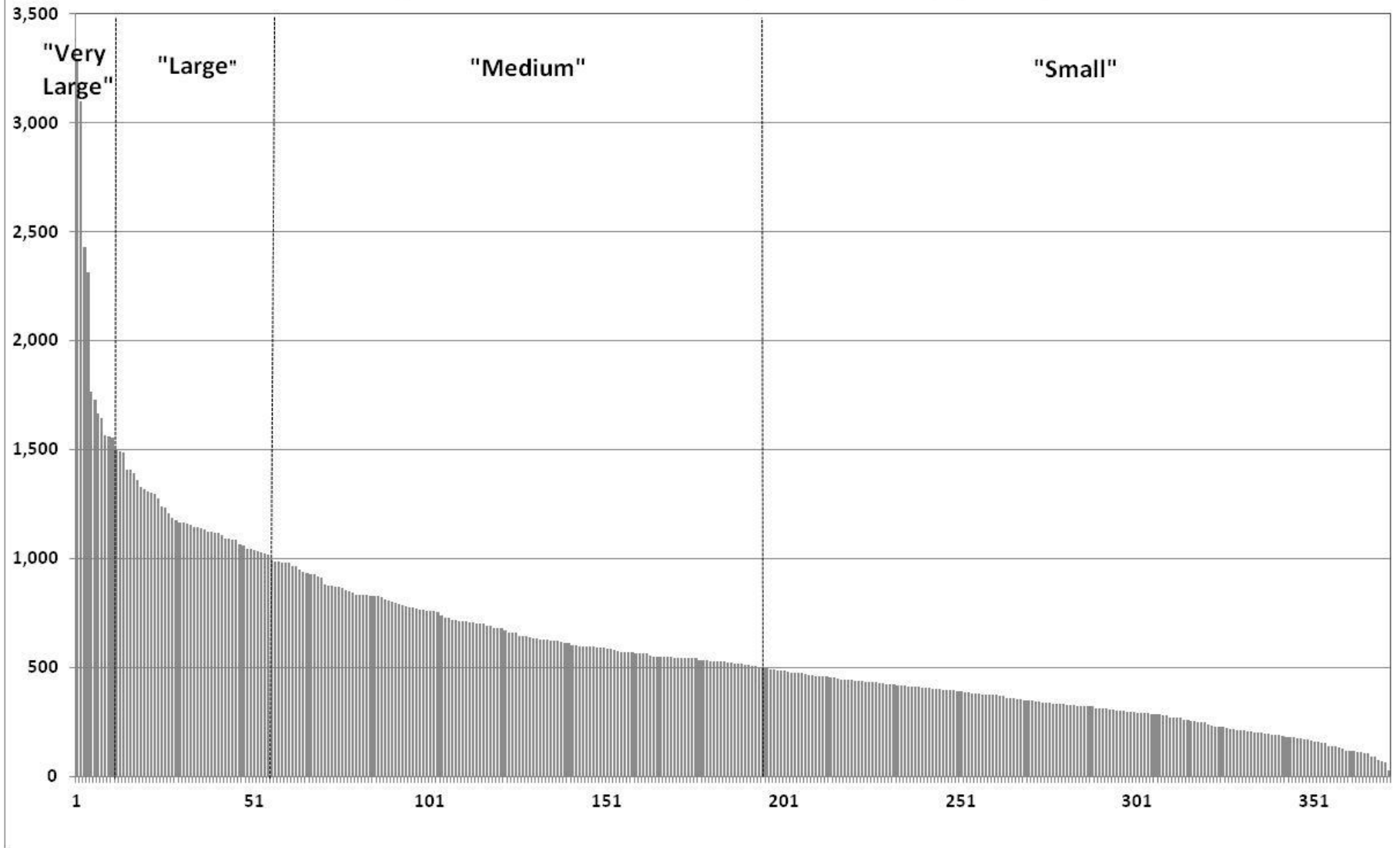
variables. However, on balance membership appeared to be the most helpful, consistent and easy to apply approach. During the research, it became apparent that there were factors impacting a small number of very large circuits. Consequently a four level categorisation of Methodist circuits appears to be helpful.

- a) Very large circuit – having 1500 or more members (Sep 2015 there were 11 such circuits)
- b) Large circuit – having 1000-1499 members (Sep 2015 there were 44 such circuits)
- c) Medium circuit – having 500-999 members (Sep 2015 there were 138 such circuits)
- d) Small circuit – having less than 500 members (Sep 2015 there were 179 such circuits)

It is the current intention that proposals for such a categorisation will be presented to the 2017 Conference.

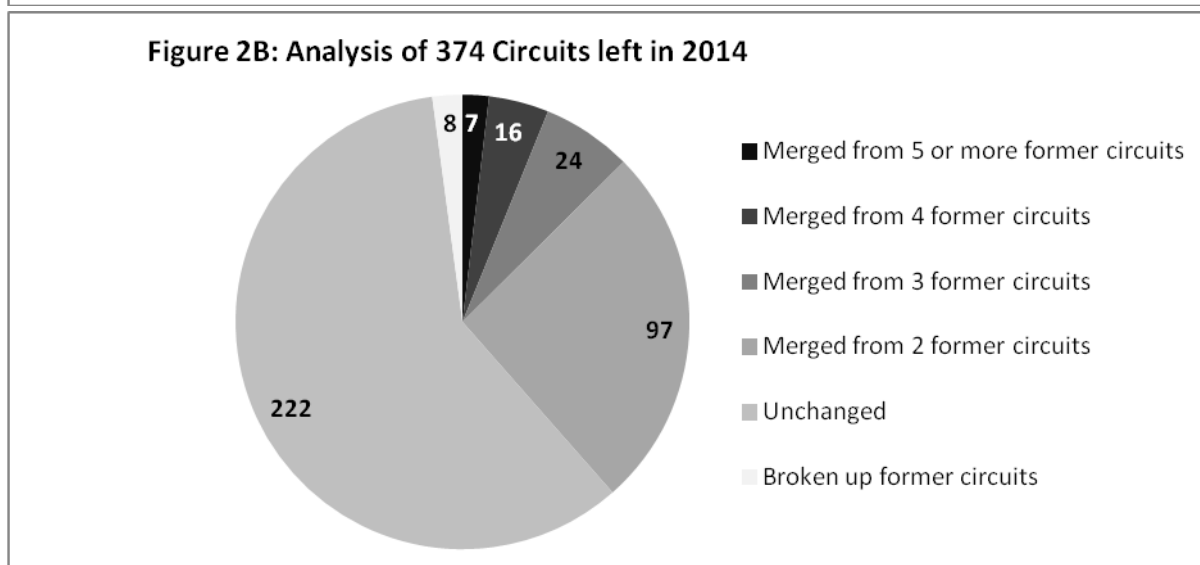
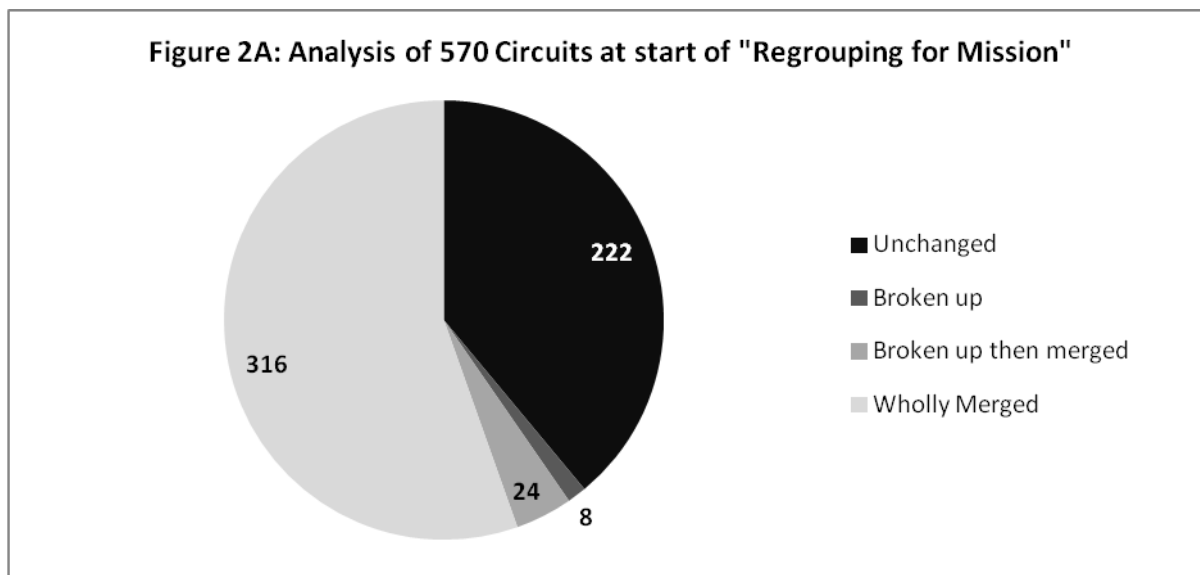
- 2.2 With the emergence of the “very large” category, circuits are less evenly distributed across the range of possible sizes than they were before. In 2007, 94.2% of all circuits were “small” or “medium-sized” using the categories here defined: by 2014, that proportion had reduced to 85.3%. Correspondingly, in 2007, only 14.4% of Methodist members belonged to churches in circuits of over 1,000 members whereas by 2014 that proportion had risen to 33.1%.

Figure 1: Circuits ranked by Membership (2014)



3. Extent of RfM 2007 – 2014

3.1 Figure 2A shows that the majority of the 570 circuits which were in existence in 2007 were affected by change of one sort or another, with over half being merged in their entirety into a new successor circuit. Figure 2B shows the position from the point of view of the 374 circuits that were left in 2014. Just under three fifths of these comprise circuits unchanged from 2007 while the other two fifths are remodelled circuits consisting of as many as twelve former circuits or parts of circuit.



3.2 There is no obvious geographical concentration of merger activity, except that London and the South East are comparatively light on circuit reorganisation – partly because major reorganisation in 2006 was there focused at *district* level.¹ Table 1 lists districts in rank order according to the percentage reduction in the number of circuits between 2007 and 2014, taking account of the twelve former circuits which transferred to one district to another. Apart from the island districts of Shetland and the Channel Islands, every district now

¹ The four former London districts were reconfigured into a single London District and new districts for the South East, and BEH.

contains at least one remodelled circuit, and in twelve out of twenty-seven districts² the proportion of remodelled circuits is half the total number of circuits in that district or higher. The proportion of Methodist *members* in remodelled circuits is higher still – given that remodelled circuits tend to be mergers of former circuits of all shapes and sizes, and thus on the whole larger than circuits remaining unchanged. Around fifty-five percent of current Methodist members belong to churches in circuits that were remodelled in the period 2007 – 2014.

Table 1: Analysis of Circuit Reorganisation by District, 2007 to 2015

| District | 2007 Circuits | Transferred to other Districts | Transferred from other Districts | "Regrouping for Mission" | 2015 Circuits | "Real" Reduction Circuit numbers (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 Synod Cymru | 13 | | | -12 | 1 | 92.3 |
| 15 Isle of Man | 3 | | | -2 | 1 | 66.7 |
| 7 Bristol | 22 | | | -14 | 8 | 63.6 |
| 16 Leeds | 18 | -3 | +1 | -10 | 6 | 62.5 |
| 27 West Yorkshire | 19 | -1 | +3 | -12 | 9 | 57.1 |
| 28 Wolverh'ton and Shrewsbury | 23 | | +3 | -14 | 12 | 53.8 |
| 25 Sheffield | 17 | -1 | | -8 | 8 | 50.0 |
| 11 Chester and Stoke-on-Trent | 23 | | | -11 | 12 | 47.8 |
| 18 Liverpool | 19 | -2 | | -8 | 9 | 47.1 |
| 29 York and Hull | 23 | | +1 | -11 | 13 | 45.8 |
| 26 Southampton | 25 | | | -10 | 15 | 40.0 |
| 5 Birmingham | 21 | -3 | | -7 | 11 | 38.9 |
| 2 Wales | 25 | | | -9 | 16 | 36.0 |
| 22 Nottingham and Derby | 24 | | +1 | -9 | 16 | 36.0 |
| 21 Lancashire | 16 | | +2 | -6 | 12 | 33.3 |
| 34 Beds, Essex and Herts | 18 | | | -6 | 12 | 33.3 |
| 36 South East | 28 | | | -9 | 19 | 32.1 |
| 24 Plymouth and Exeter | 23 | | | -6 | 17 | 26.1 |
| 17 Lincolnshire | 16 | | | -4 | 12 | 25.0 |
| 20 Newcastle upon Tyne | 16 | | | -4 | 12 | 25.0 |
| 35 London | 46 | | | -10 | 36 | 21.7 |
| 6 Bolton and Rochdale | 10 | -1 | +1 | -2 | 8 | 20.0 |
| 9 Cumbria | 15 | | | -3 | 12 | 20.0 |
| 12 Cornwall | 20 | | | -4 | 16 | 20.0 |
| 14 East Anglia | 18 | | | -3 | 15 | 16.7 |
| 13 Darlington | 14 | -1 | | -2 | 11 | 15.4 |
| 31 Scotland | 8 | | | -1 | 7 | 12.5 |
| 19 Manchester and Stockport | 20 | | | -1 | 19 | 5.0 |
| 23 Northampton | 24 | | | -1 | 23 | 4.2 |
| 10 Channel Islands | 2 | | | 0 | 2 | 0.0 |
| 32 Shetland | 1 | | | 0 | 1 | 0.0 |
| Total | 570 | | | | 371 | |

² ie the 31 districts less the island districts already mentioned, as well as the Isle of Man and Synod Cymru, which both comprise a single remodelled circuit.

- 3.3 Membership numbers – though far from ideal – are probably still the best single measure of whether a circuit has “expanded” or “shrunk”.³ Here it is important to distinguish between two different things: (a) “growth” or “decline” arising from existing members transferring from one circuit to another as a result of circuit reorganisation – i.e. “organisational” (some might say “paper” growth or decline); and (b) “growth” resulting from new members, offset by “decline” resulting from deaths and members ceasing to meet – ie “organic” (some might say “real” growth and decline). Figure 3 is based on a calculation, for each currently exiting circuit, of how much “organisational” growth there has been, using 2007 membership numbers. Numbers in the currently existing circuit structure (vertical axis) are plotted against a weighted average of numbers in the relevant 2007 circuit structure (horizontal axis). Where a circuit has been unchanged since 2007, these two values will be the same, accounting for the large number of circuits strung out along the line $x = y$.
- 3.4 For circuits “above the line” (ie those which have grown through merger or other organisational change), around twenty have effectively doubled in size, around eighty have grown by less than this; and around forty have more than doubled in size. There is no significant correlation between the size of a circuit to begin with and the rate of organisational growth: some formerly small circuits have expanded significantly while others have grown only by a small amount, and the same holds true of large circuits. Circuits tending towards the top left hand corner of the chart are those which have grown most dramatically – the so-called “super-mergers”. These include Sheffield (eight circuits averaging 557 members pre-merger; one circuit 3,771 post-merger) and Birmingham (four circuits averaging 975 members pre-merger; one circuit 3,561 post merger). Synod Cymru is also significant in that its twelve pre-merger circuits averaged just 172 members, compared to 1,799 post-merger.

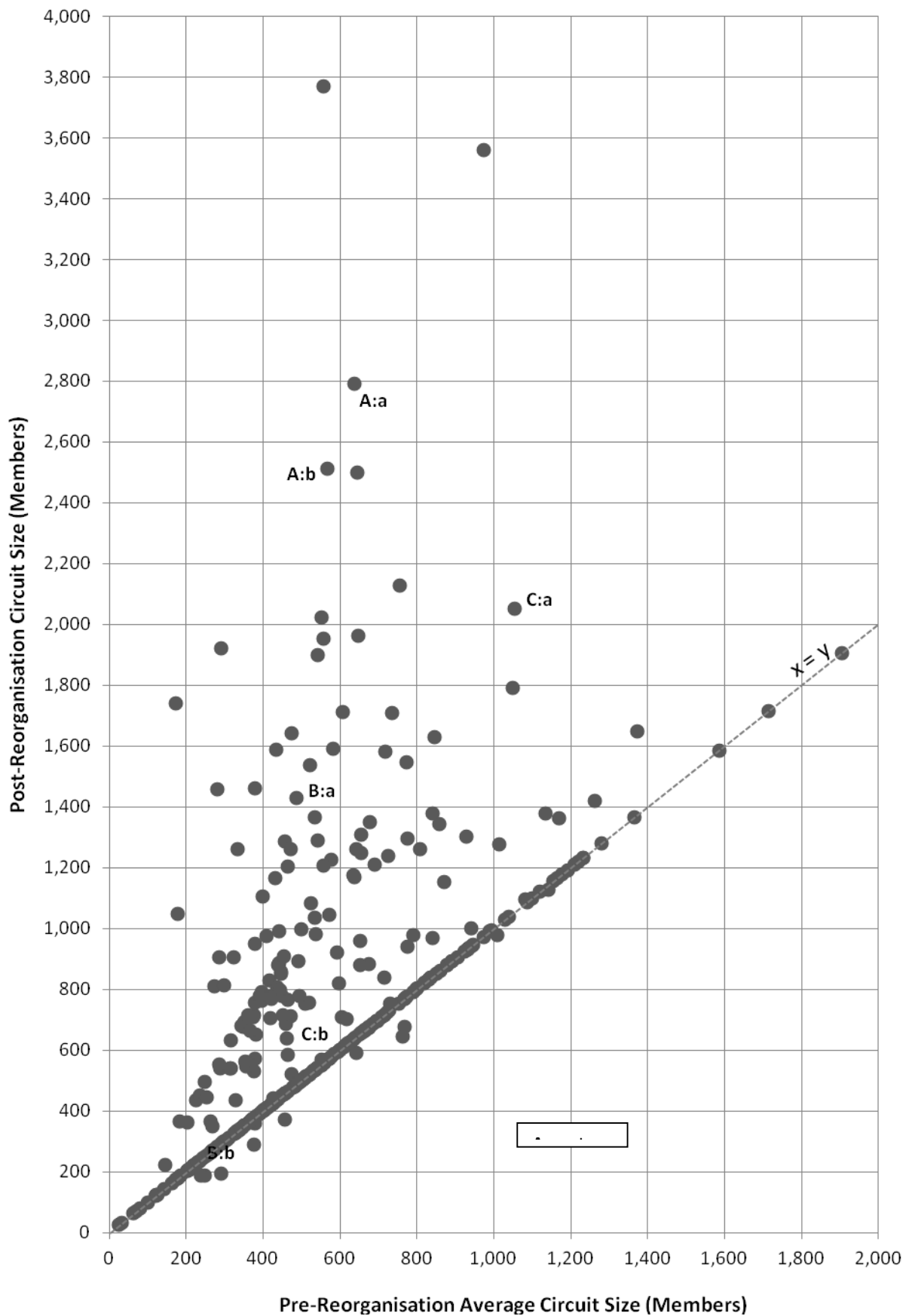
4. “Change” and “Growth”

- 4.1 Having isolated the effects of “organisational” growth, it is instructive to compare these against circuits’ reported rates of “organic” growth or decline. When organisational growth rates were plotted against “real” percentage change in Methodist membership over the period 2007 to 2014, there was found to be no significant correlation between organising circuits into bigger units and rates of membership growth or decline. This does not mean that enlarging a circuit has no positive impact on “real” membership numbers: it simply means that it does not *necessarily* do so. There are enlarged circuits associated with relatively positive membership trends but also those associated with relatively poor performance.
- 4.2 Some sensitivity analysis was carried out into whether circuit reorganisation impacted more on worship attendance figures than on membership numbers, but there was no evidence that this was the case. Nor did it make any significant difference whether circuits’ effective dates of merger were towards the beginning or end of the 2017 – 2014 period (ie there appeared to be no discernible “bedding down” effect in terms of membership numbers).
- 4.3 Movement in “real” membership numbers is more likely to be affected either by broader trends, such as members’ age demographics, or by local factors, such as church initiatives or changes in the local neighbourhood. Research is ongoing to examine these issues in greater detail. It would be safe to conclude in the interim, however, that circuit reorganisation is not in itself a strategy for promoting growth or even for slowing decline – though it may

³ Community Roll numbers, which include not just members but all those within the pastoral care of a Local Church, would in theory be a better measure, but are compromised by widely differing counting and reporting practices across the Connexion.

assist in the management of growth or decline.

Figure 3: Circuit Reorganisation 2007 - 2014



5. Emerging Themes from Stage One Research

5.1 When the insights from the statistical, questionnaire and case study research, are considered together, there are a number of themes that emerge regarding the impact of the Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission process. The themes that emerge from the research are consistent. There was no significant difference between the insights from each of the three approaches. This triangulation and consistency enables a strong degree of confidence in the findings.

- a) **Process:** The regrouping process is largely positive. Circuits are able successfully to address the administrative issues that arise although in some cases it appears that circuits have had to discover ways of dealing with issues that are known elsewhere in Methodism but not widely shared. There is an emotional cost borne in particular by superintendents and some circuit officers. The support of chairs, district development enablers and others during this period has been greatly valued although there was a variety of approach. The level of support that Methodist members gave to their previous circuits has been largely transferred to the regrouped entity. Regrouped circuits appear to be stronger entities than their predecessors and addressed, to some extent, financial and other challenges that were making some previous circuit had to sustain. This level of improvement is significant and has enabled a further generation of circuit life in some places.
- b) **Membership:** RfM has not had a significant impact on membership. Circuits have not experienced numerical growth through RfM; indeed decline has remained fairly constant. Variety in rates appears to be largely due to local factors rather than RfM.
- c) **Mission:** Mission focus in intent has sometimes been a prime motivating reason, but administrative factors around regrouping have, in the initial years of regrouping, absorbed large amounts of time and energy. The qualitative research in particular points to mission as the key area where Methodism needs now to focus.
- d) **Staffing:** Regrouped circuits are being staffed by a small reduction in ordained staff and a small increase in lay employees who are normally in roles related to administration, finance and property. This is occurring in an era when numbers of candidates for ordination are lower.
- e) **Circuit Officers:** There are fewer circuit officers needed when a number of circuits regroup. For example, when five circuits come together there is only one treasurer, one safeguarding officer etc needed. However, the reduction in numbers needed is somewhat offset by the increased responsibilities of such positions and consequently some very large circuits now have paid employees carrying out some of these responsibilities formerly undertaken by volunteers. The case studies in particular raised issues regarding the wellbeing of circuit officers, and of ministerial colleagues, during the RfM process and especially where large and very large circuits emerged. This will be shared with the Connexional Wellbeing Adviser.
- f) **Connexionalism:** This research has noted an ambivalent relationship from local congregations and to some extent from circuits towards being part of a Connexion. This perspective is noted alongside the ongoing conversations regarding 'Issues of Connexionalism in the 21st Century' (2015 Conference).

6. Factors that Impact Very Large Circuits

6.1 It is apparent that some factors impact very large circuits which do not necessarily impact smaller circuits:

- a) **Circuit governance:** A Circuit Meeting may contain 150 or more members and consequently that presents challenges for trustee responsibilities. Some circuits have found appropriate ways to discuss business within smaller groupings, and recommend for decision to the Circuit Meeting which remains the decision making body.
- b) **Local Preachers and Worship Leaders:** Significant time is required to develop preaching plans. Consistency of preaching is an issue. The greater distance and number of congregations stretches the meaning of being a local preacher as it has recently been experienced within Methodism and in reality many are visiting preachers without an in depth understanding of the local context. Benefits include a greater number of preachers and worship leaders making training and development opportunities easier to organise.
- c) **District:** A very large circuit has a different relationship to the district than a smaller entity, requiring less administrative support. This insight will be shared with the Larger than Circuit Coordination Group.
- d) **Superintendency:** Being superintendent of a very large circuit, and some large circuits, appears to carry enhanced responsibilities and to need certain gifts and graces that not all who offer to be a superintendent will necessary have. It appears that some potential superintendents are reluctant to offer for very large circuits. Qualitative aspects of the research suggested that different stationing procedures for such appointments may be helpful. Additional preparation and support for these superintendents may also be helpful. The superintendent as a transformational leader is recognised as of increasing importance. The Council might like to note that the Church of England report 'Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach' (2014) recognised some of these issues as they relate to senior clergy in large Anglican parishes. Two of the cases study circuits have moved or are moving from multiple to single superintendency. There are currently seven circuits in British Methodism with more than one superintendent, ranging from two to a maximum of four. Qualitative evidence supports the view that multiple superintendency of a circuit appears not to be the way forward.

7. Stage Two Research

- 7.1 MC/15/96 9.3 agreed that there would be a Stage Two research project with eight areas for further research indicated. As a consequence of the findings of this Stage One research, it is suggested that Stage Two will address the emerging themes by means of the following:
 - a) Further documentary, qualitative and quantitative research, including with presbyters who are not superintendents, deacons and society stewards, and further case studies. This research will also consider insights from other contexts where similar processes to RfM have been undertaken (MC/15/96 9.3.i, v, vii).
 - b) To consider issues around the appointment, preparation and support of superintendents of very large circuits (MC/15/96 9.3.i).
 - c) Planned research into Fresh Expressions within the Methodist Church in 2016-17 to consider further the impact of RfM on such initiatives (MC/15/96 9.3.vi) and will report separately.
 - d) Recognising that Methodism is successfully regrouping but not yet experiencing significant missional impact in terms of making 'more followers of Jesus Christ', to research what is appropriate evangelism within the Methodist Church (MC/15/96 9.3.i, viii).

7.2 This Stage Two research will report to the Council in April 2017 and the Conference in 2017, will be undertaken by the Strategic Research Team and Susanna Wesley Foundation, and is within existing budget provision.

7.3 Three areas of research indicated in MC/15/96 are now considered as a result of Stage One as no longer required:

MC/15/96 9.3.ii 'Engagement with existing research relating to the role of District Evangelism Enabler' – it is considered that the 'District Development Enablers Project Review' (2012) adequately addresses these issues.

MC/15/96 9.3.iii 'Engagement with existing research on the place of districts and chairs' – it is considered that this area is being addressed by the Larger than Circuit Coordination Group.

MC/15/96 9.3.iv 'Development of the questionnaire research undertaken in phase 1 to include "all superintendents and all circuit stewards"' – it is considered that the consistency in findings of stage 1 means that this is not necessary and will garner no additional insights beyond already achieved.

*****RESOLUTION**

37/1. The Council receives the report.