

Discernment Process for Senior Posts

MC/24/45

Meeting date	13-15 April 2024
Contact Name and Details	Mr Richard Armiger, Head of Ministries and Learning; Chair of the Ministries Committee Sub-Group on a Discernment Process for Senior Posts
Action Required	Decision
Resolutions	45/1. The Council receives the report. 45/2. The Council approves both the direction of travel as outlined in the report and the development of the proposed Pilot Support Programme 2024-2025 for new and incoming District Chairs. 45/3. The Council directs the Ministries Committee to work with the sub-group to undertake the further development that is required for the work.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To bring the Methodist Council up to date with the work of the Ministries Committee Sub-Group on a Discernment Process for Senior Posts
Main Points	Background to the work of the Sub-Group. Research process and conversations. Characteristics of those who thrive in senior roles. Discernment Process leading to recommendations for the 2025 Conference. Support Programme Development – proposed pilot for District Chairs starting from September 2024.

Background to the work of the Sub-Group

1. The 2022 Conference directed the Ministries Committee to continue its work on discernment for senior roles and to report to the 2023 Conference, to consider how vocations for leadership in the Church can be appropriately identified, fostered, and coordinated with processes of appointment. In September 2022 the Ministries Committee appointed a sub-group to take this work forward. The Group has looked at two areas for consideration by the Committee: one is a broad overview of the background and issues in leadership development for senior posts facing the Church in these times, and the other is a set of specific proposals for the discernment and support of those who feel called to this work.
2. Members of the sub-group for 2023/2024 are the Revd Cathy Bird (nominated from the Justice Dignity Solidarity Committee), the Revd Dr Christine Dutton (Tutor in Evangelism and Leadership at the Queen's Foundation and a member of the Ministries: Vocations and Worship team), the Revd Angy Long (District Chair, Lincolnshire) and Mrs Karen Stefanyszyn from the Ministries Committee, with Mr Richard Armiger (Head of Ministries and Learning) as Chair. The group met on 19.12.23 and 19.02.24.
3. It was felt important that some description of "senior posts" was attempted and they are identified as leadership roles in *Districts* (Chairs, Deputy / Assistant Chairs, Synod secretaries / senior lay roles in District leadership teams) and the *Connexion* (Chairs / Deputy Chairs of Committees, Secretariat of the Conference, senior leadership roles in the Connexional Team).

4. The discernment required in our current context of uncertainty and complexity (what some writers call “liminality”: the times between something ended and something not yet ready to begin) is no longer best served by being based simply on competencies but rather attention needs to be given to individuals’ strengths. The group defined strengths as a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of thinking, feeling or behaving that is authentic and energising. Such key strengths might include:
- mental, people and change agility
 - thriving in situations of complexity, uncertainty and expanding horizons of knowledge and wisdom
 - those who relish working with others, and have a proven record as team builders
 - those who are effective at learning from experience

Some in the Group talked about these as “lead” indicators of suitability for senior posts (pointing to what the person might become) rather than “lag indicators” (drawing predominantly on what the person has already done in other roles). The relationship between competencies and personal strengths needs further exploration, as does the approach suggested here in relation to the competencies for other roles.

5. It is critical that the diversity and experience of persons identified in ordained and lay roles should be given greater attention. Success in any process supporting discernment will lead to a Church with a diverse senior leadership.
6. The group felt strongly that the discernment and support of those called to these roles, as indeed to any leadership within the Church, is a long-term commitment. It is a process that stretches for the ordained from initial formation in ministry, through training, probation and continued development and, for lay persons, an ongoing review of those identified say as circuit stewards and synod officers. The question was asked as to whether the Explore programme being developed for the new candidating process might be a good model but the group acknowledges that there is little capacity to develop this currently.

Research process and conversations

7. In January/February 2024, the sub-group carried out interviews with twenty-five senior leaders from across the Connexion including a number of District Chairs, members of the Senior Management Group, Chairs of the main Connexional Committees and representatives from Justice, Dignity and Solidarity. These were mostly one-to-one interviews with the exception of a group meeting with some District Chairs. The conversations covered thoughts on:
- the life of role-holders in senior posts, their lived experience, needs, challenges and ideas.
 - when it goes wrong, what happened and what can we learn?
 - the context of these times – what the leaders of tomorrow are being prepared for.

Characteristics of those who thrive in senior roles

8. The sub-group considers a potential Senior Leader as a person, lay or ordained, who has accepted the call to serve the Church in a particular way and a particular place and in this time of change and transition, which is recognised to be a liminal time. What differentiates a senior leader position will include the basics of knowledge, skill and experience, plus the differentiating spiritual maturity, natural strengths and consciousness, which enable a person to thrive, as a role-holder and as a Church. Some of the identified qualities of senior leaders who thrive in senior roles include:

a. Spirituality

- A well-developed life of prayer that enables the individual to hold responsibility before God. They will be recognisable as a disciple of Christ and will demonstrate the ability to inspire others in discipleship and service.
- Evidence of a mature and robust spirituality \ expression of faith which can be sustained in times of difficulty and relative isolation. Comfortable with uncertainty and a non-anxious presence for others.

b. Self-Awareness

- A demonstration of honest awareness and articulation of their own strengths and weaknesses, and those of others. Evidence of the ability to learn from experience and the experience of others.

- A developed understanding of confidentiality and its appropriate limits.
 - A robustness and resilience and an awareness of vulnerability. The resilience to cope with criticism without being so resilient as to ignore legitimate challenge.
- c. Working with others/ leading teams**
- A proven ability (from their current context and previous work and life experience) to live out a call to leadership that is attentive to the voice of others.
 - A proven ability to inspire and encourage others. A proven capacity to enable others to flourish through their use of gifts and skills. A proven ability in and enthusiasm for shared work, in teams and with groups both within Methodism and ecumenically.
 - A proven capacity for truth telling and truth bearing and the building up of truthful communities.
- d. Leadership models and awareness of diversity**
- A proven ability to enjoy and to relish learning from and celebrating difference and diversity, and a desire to encourage diversity in leadership.
 - A proven rejection of “solitary and heroic” leadership patterns and the proven ability to build teams in every context. A proven ability to use power and privilege appropriately. A proven ability to work in close proximity with others in mutually supportive ways and to relish sharing work and tasks.
 - A desire to improve in their practice and discipleship, and proven ability to learn from their experience particularly from situations of crisis and failure.
 - Demonstrable skills in and experience of change management.
- e. Strategy/Connexional ways of working**
- Ability to bear significant responsibility within their context, to deal with situations of conflict, to carry sensitive and confidential information, to manage difficult processes.
 - An understanding of the nature of the oversight of the Conference and a proven ability to work with officers of the Conference, and other senior leaders.
 - A proven clarity around the management of boundaries and processes of justice and reconciliation.

Discernment Process leading to recommendations for the 2025 Conference

9. The group continues to reflect on current discernment processes and recognises that further work is required before defined proposals can be presented to the Ministries Committee and the Council. This work will include paying attention to the qualities and characteristics of people in senior leader positions who thrive and how this work can then be best reflected in the processes for appointing senior leaders.
- a. It is anticipated that this further work will include exploration of a number of stages of discernment including, but not limited to, the following areas. We recognise that the different routes for lay and ordained discernment processes will need to be taken into account. The areas listed here are intended to be as generic as they can be at this stage:
- **Initial call and initial discernment** – individuals feeling a call to serve in senior roles, whether lay or ordained, typically begin by discerning their vocation through prayer, reflection, consultation with and prompting by others including existing leaders.
 - **Exploration of roles** – those sensing a call may engage in conversations with their local church leaders, or circuit or district representatives to explore different opportunities. This may include participation in various church activities, and leadership roles. There is opportunity here for those in existing leadership roles to identify and encourage those who exhibit leadership potential.
 - **Learning and development** – discernment may come through engaging in a range of learning and development activities. Learning can often encourage those engaging with it to consider ways in which they might seek further development opportunities. Paying attention to discernment through the range of learning and development opportunities offered will continue to be an important part of the work.
 - **District and Conference engagement** – aspiring leaders often become actively involved at district or connexional level, gaining experience in Church leadership and the wider Connexion

through a range of roles and opportunities. There are further opportunities here for existing leaders to spot and encourage potential.

- **Nomination, recruitment and selection / stationing processes** – those seeking senior roles may either nominate themselves or be nominated by others, depending upon the relevant process, as vacancies in senior roles become available. They will then undergo a range of recruitment and selection processes conducted by the appropriate appointing body, and in line with the relevant stationing process if appropriate. This will include consideration of an individual's theological understanding, leadership skills and pastoral sensitivity amongst other requirements, many of which are described in section 8 of this report.
- **Recommendations and approvals** – based on the outcome of the recruitment and selection process, the candidate may be recommended for appointment to a specific role with the appropriate decision making body approving the appointment and following any relevant stationing processes.
- **Appointment** – once approved, individuals are appointed to the specific role, in line with the stationing process if appropriate.
- **Continuing development** – Senior leaders are encouraged to engage in ongoing professional and spiritual development. This is the focus for the pilot support programme outlined below.

Discernment is an integral part of the overall process, as well as the individual elements within the process, and is seen as an individual and as a corporate activity.

Paying attention to achieving an appropriate balance between these aspects is seen as a vital part of how the further work on the discernment for senior posts develops.

10. The wider work on discernment also needs further work recognising that we need to define the process of discernment in some way regardless of the role and the process of selection. Whilst identifying the desire for a clearly identified process, the group would want to ensure that there is freedom and flexibility within the process so that attention can be paid to the character traits of senior leaders that we have identified.
11. Within this further work there are a number of defined selection processes that will need to be reviewed with proposals on any suggested changes as part of that work.
12. The additional work on discernment and selection processes will also take into account the work of the God For All strategy, the Justice-Seeking Church strategy, the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity strategy, paying attention to the contexts that senior leaders operate in, and our desire to enable a truly diverse and inclusive senior leadership within the Church.
13. This piece of work also relates to the work that the Faith and Order Committee is overseeing on the Role of a District Chair, as part of the Oversight and Trusteeship Work, and it will therefore be helpful to have some conversation about their interrelation at the appropriate time.
14. The group will also undertake a review of the relevant Standing Orders relating to the discernment and selection of those in senior roles following on from this process.
15. Taking into account the importance of drawing all of the various strands of this work together and a desire to ensure that any recommendations appropriately meet the contextual needs of this liminal time, the group propose that further work is undertaken during 2024-2025. The intention will be to bring additional proposals on the discernment and selection processes for senior roles to the 2025 Conference.

Pilot Support Programme Development – proposed pilot for District Chairs starting from September 2024

16. One of the significant areas of feedback from the individual and group conversations was around the nature of support that is needed for those appointed to senior roles. The complexities, ambiguities and risks associated with a senior role are significant. Therefore, the support that is offered needs to enable those within senior roles to be prepared for these and appropriately supported through them.

17. The offer of a suitable senior leadership support programme was warmly welcomed by all those who were involved in the research conversations.
18. The group therefore proposes an initial support programme pilot starting September 2024 and a potential cohort could be the new and incoming District Chairs. In suggesting this, the sub-group recognises the work that is already undertaken for the induction programme for District Chairs and the new Chairs' programme of meetings. It would want to ensure that the pilot programme would work alongside and be complementary to the existing work. It is anticipated that the pilot would work with a cohort of 10-12 people. The pilot would include ongoing review and reflection over the course of the year so that the learning from the pilot could then be offered out more broadly – for other senior leaders lay and ordained.
19. The group has previously recommended two leadership-learning resources and considers that a development of the Leadership Learning Space (LLS) model, which has had highly positive feedback, would be most appropriate for the cohort of District Chairs during 2024-2025. This would in effect be a Senior Leadership Learning Space (SLLS) pilot. Whilst the current Leadership Learning Space cohort meets monthly, we will evaluate the suitable frequency for the District Chairs' cohort.
20. Using that timescale we will have had a year of the new Nominations Committee by the 2025 Conference and will be able to link in the reflection and learning from how that process has worked as we seek to take this work forward. As reported to the Council, the Nominations Committee is meeting monthly on the first Monday of each month to look at any nominations that have been presented to it.
21. All the District Chairs are in Supervision, and so are supported in reflective practice in that way. Many will also be in spiritual direction. There is also existing space for on-going review and reflection as part of the Chairs' Meetings. Offering the SLLS alongside these existing support spaces will provide an additional level of support which will be complementary to what is already in place. It is recognised that the group of new and incoming District Chairs is also the largest internal cohort of new senior leaders that we have at present. It is hoped that the learning from the pilot will enable us to identify how a senior leadership support programme helps in offering a space for equipping, reflecting, supporting and enabling leadership.
22. Experience has shown that support of peers in the same situation is very helpful and hugely sustaining. Friendships are developed and members of the cohort could also find their own local peers with which to share. The SLLS will provide a suitable space for pastoral support of one another, alongside the reflection and learning that will naturally take place within the learning space.
23. It is important to stress that the purpose of this support programme will be for leadership development as opposed to assessment. However, it is anticipated that this will form an important stage of discernment and a shared process for all those who engage in the learning programmes.
24. Alongside the SLLS we will seek to develop opportunities for mentoring and coaching for those in senior roles recognising the additional benefits of individual support alongside that of group support. Work on developing this approach would take into account the existing mentoring relationships that exist for district chairs and others in senior roles. It is anticipated that individual coaching sessions might be offered to those participating in the SLLS in between the formal gatherings of the cohort. This is likely to be offered by those facilitating the SLLS so that the development and learning is a richer experience for the individuals and the SLLS cohort as a whole.
25. The Sub-group has had some discussion on the shape and structure for the support programme. However it is acknowledged that further work is required to build the core components of the programme. As mentioned previously, this work will take into account the existing induction, new chairs' meetings and other reflective spaces, so as to be complementary to these as the pilot develops. The group is due to meet in person early in May 2024 to carry out this further work on the content of the Pilot Programme with the intention of launching the programme early in the new connexional year 2024-2025. The group will provide regular updates to the Ministries Committee as this work develops.
26. During 2024-2025 as the Pilot Programme is offered and developed, the sub-group will reflect further on how the programme might be able to offer suitable support for senior roles more widely, taking into account both lay and ordained roles.

27. It is anticipated that the approach to the SLLS will be broadened and developed so that it can be offered to all those in senior roles, lay and ordained in the life of the Church. As the work is developed, attention will be paid to the specific needs of those in senior roles taking into account the mix of lay and ordained and those who are in voluntary roles. It is hoped that, following on from the pilot, the expansion of the SLLS will accommodate a wider range of senior roles from 2025-2026 onwards.
28. The focus for this work is on discernment and support for senior roles in the life of the Church will be developed to meet this need accordingly. However it is recognised that the learning from this work is likely to be able to offer a model of support that that could be tailored for others in leadership roles in the life of the Church. The Ministries Committee will therefore reflect on the learning from this work and review ways in which the model of leadership development could be adapted for those who fall outside of the scope of the work on senior roles.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 45/1. The Council receives the report.**
- 45/2. The Council approves both the direction of travel as outlined in the report and the development of the proposed Pilot Support Programme 2024-2025 for new and incoming District Chairs.**
- 45/3. The Council directs the Ministries Committee to work with the sub-group to undertake the further development that is required for the work.**