

## District Reviews – a report from the Connexional Leaders' Forum

Following the online meeting of the Council, held on 24 September, it was agreed that the Connexional Leaders' Forum (CLF) should be asked to have a conversation about the draft Terms of Reference that had been presented to the Council following approval of the Conference to continue the work in this area.

The CLF met on 27-28 September and as part of its agenda took part in a session on the District Reviews currently taking place, which is reported to the Council here to help determine the next steps.

One representative from each of the Regions offered a summary of where their grouping had reached in their conversations so far:

### **Cymru/Wales**

Spring Synods of the two Districts received outline proposals for a single Synod for the Methodist Church in Wales working bilingually. More detail has been requested but now working towards September 2022 as being the date for the new Synod. Main issues around language and finance to be addressed. Implementation Group to be created and report to go to Methodist Council.

### **NW & Mann**

Agreed to enter into a review process as seven Districts together. A small group from within the lay/ordained working group were asked to draw up proposals to plan an alternative way forward for the future, this was helped by facilitation from the Learning Network Co-ordinator. There is now more detailed work being done on a model that has been agreed upon as the best way forward. At this time it was recognised that the Isle of Man District needs to remain separate from some considerations.

### **West Midlands**

Two Districts involved in conversations and sharing many functions already – view of the future is that this could be one District, an awareness of the conversations in nearby Districts which could impact this.

### **South West**

Five Districts meeting together with ordained/lay representatives. The Channel Islands to stay as a separate jurisdiction.

There is already commitment to work together to bring the support for ministry and lay roles across the five Districts into one region.

A 'Regional hub' was explored for a variety of support functions but this has been put to one side.

The group recognise that their thinking may be overtaken by a 'connexional' approach which might take a different road and is keen to know what that might be.

### **Yorkshire Plus**

Stationing and Learning Network Regions are co-terminus which is recognised as being advantageous. The move from four Districts to three in 2017 means that changes had already taken place and the commitment to work together is still as strong as ever with a continual reflection on what else could be done. Some staff being employed across the District boundaries and ministry support work being undertaken regionally. The Districts are continuing to focus on the missional priorities identified four years ago.

### **North-East**

The two Districts are continuing to work on ministerial issues across the geographical boundaries. It is felt that there are significant differences across these Districts and noting the relational nature of the work on mission between Circuits and the Districts it is felt it is the wrong time to be doing something strategically different with structures.

### **East Midlands**

Four Districts working together and a Lay Chair has been appointed for the working group to keep the focus moving forward. Much ministerial work already being shared with the next stages being thought to be around the sharing of resources, both financial and those of property. Work has also been done on leadership and the bold step being taken of the Nottingham & Derby Chair being replaced by a Deputy Chair who will work with the Chair of Northampton District. Changes are highlighting that more work needs to be done on a connexional understanding of the roles of Deputy/Assistant Chairs as well as what a 'Regional Chair' could look like.

### **South East**

It is 15 years since the London District, Beds Essex and Herts District and the South East District were constituted in their current forms. It was noted that the Learning Network is currently configured in different ways across the region which can complicate the sharing of resources.

London District having a formal review of the leadership of the District and what it needs to be for the future. Possible ways ahead will hopefully emerge in the next year.

### **Scotland and Shetland**

Deputy Chair in Shetland has been in place with one Chair working across the two Districts. Many areas of ministry and mission now have shared support across the two Districts. A further review of this way of working is planned for the year ahead.

Regional working is also taking place with North East Region for stationing purposes.

Following this round up of the current state of the conversations the CLF broke into smaller groups and were asked to discuss what the areas of concern were with the process and the Terms of Reference as offered.

The following are some of the main points of concern that the CLF heard reported back:

- Working together regionally with the Districts still in place is better than making bigger Districts.
- The evolutionary approach to change has worked so why can we not continue? The Review as set out was thought to be too top-down whilst others had requested a connexional lead on this.
- Some noted that the organic nature of the conversation is critical and needs to be preserved whilst also feeling that the iterative engagement between a connexional framework and what was emerging would not work.
- What is needed for a District to fulfil the role they are given? There was a sense that we need to be bringing clarity to what the role of the District is before we determine the number we need. It was expressed that the District identity is critical to our members (although others noted that some people don't even identify with their Circuit). This focus on the function of a District led to a question about what were the connexional principles behind what a District does? One expression of this was that a District was to support the mission and ministry on the ground whereas some saw this as the role of the Circuit.
- Concern was expressed around the oversight of ministry within any changes – nothing explicitly mentioned about the presbyteral oversight in the role of the current Chair.
- Some felt it was wrong to hardwire in the idea that there have to be fewer Districts and doubt was raised that it will actually save money and enable more fruitfulness. The aim could be rationalisation not reduction (although for some this felt too functional).

- A call for further financial information and detail was shared. It was felt that the financial case for a reduction in the number of Districts had not been made convincingly and that it was too straightforward an argument to see the reduction of Chairs as a way of saving money; this will not work if the Districts have to pay for lay salaries to backfill roles vacated by Chairs. However, some felt that the reduction in the numbers of District Chairs and Districts was perhaps inevitable as we see the continuing decline of members and the lack of people to take up roles that are required for a District to operate.
- A reduction in the number of District Chairs would lead to a diminished Connexional Leaders Forum/Chairs meeting; the current diverse set of perspectives that carry contextual, cultural, historical, theological and other particular levels of experience and expertise could be lost to us if not rethought.
- It was felt that resources of all kinds were being used more effectively across the regions – affirming the principle of sharing. However, concern was raised that the NPNP strategy was being rooted in the Districts so to have a hard aim of reducing the number of Districts would cause disruption to that although this could be taken into account moving forward.
- Given there was already a range of models in existence around the Connexion of how Chairs and Districts operated we should not be too concerned about different models emerging however for others a concern of how to hold the connexional principle if models differ.
- Noting that the numbers of Districts are linked to the size of the Conference and Committees it was asked whether representation could come from the Regions rather than Districts thus giving some of the reductions that were needed.

From the detailed points shared above the Council can see that there is not a unanimity of view on the next steps to be taken. For some in the discussion there is a desire to make faster progress on the current conversation and rationalise but for others there is a deep sense of disquiet about the focus and outcome of this work.

The Council has been directed by the Conference to appoint the Task Group for Regional and District Structure Planning and agreed its constitution at its last meeting. In order to enable the Task Group to make progress, the following amended Terms of Reference are now offered which take account of the concerns outlined above but still give some impetus to the work itself.

### **Amended Terms of Reference for the Task Group for Regional and District Structure Planning**

The overall aim of the Task Group is to work collaboratively with district groupings to identify structures which work connexionally, contextually and consensually in fulfilling *Our Calling*, reporting to the Methodist Council on any proposed changes to district structures under SO 401(2).

The Task Group will therefore work:

- To ensure that all Districts continue to engage in conversations alongside others about regional ways of working and to gather the outcomes of collaborative models of leadership and oversight;
- To consider the outcomes and offer regional groups the emerging connexional framework for the future structure following approval of the structure by the Council;
- To engage with the regional groups on their proposals for the future, and to offer feedback from a connexional viewpoint on what has been proposed (including budgetary considerations);
- To work with District Chairs and other leaders to map the emerging connexional framework for the future structure and the process for change through to 2023/24;

- To ensure that any proposed changes in district leadership or the purpose of a district are informed by other work on leadership (from the Faith and Order Committee, the Ministries Committee, and elsewhere);
- To bring together thinking about other senior posts in Districts (Deputy Chairs, Assistant Chairs, “District Steward”, “Senior Deacon”, and others) and to work with Faith and Order and Law and Polity on future development of these roles and incorporation as necessary in the Standing Orders;
- To report to the Council in April 2022 and to the 2022 Conference.

**\*\*\*RESOLUTIONS**

**71/1. The Council receives the report.**

**71/2. The Council approves the terms of reference for the Task Group for Regional and District Structure Planning.**