

Report on Oversight and Trusteeship at the Conference

MC/22/76

Date of meeting	17-18 October 2022
Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Jonathan R Hustler, Secretary of the Conference soc@methodistchurch.org.uk
Action required	To note

Summary of content

Subject of aims	To update the Council on Oversight and Trusteeship work following the debate and decisions at the Conference.
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The 2021 Conference directed 'the Secretary of the Conference to convene an Oversight and Trusteeship steering group; and further directed that group to receive and consider the reports from the Ministries, Law and Polity, Faith and Order and Strategy and Resources committees and the successor body to the District Review Monitoring Group and the group doing further work on the size of the Conference as set out in this report, to ensure that future proposals are comprehensive and coherent, and to bring a full report with recommendations to the 2022 Conference.' That report was number 44 in the Conference Agenda and is available for download from <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/27062/conf-22-44-oversight-trusteeship-1022.pdf> in the form it was received by the Conference.

The Conference accepted some of the proposals before it but declined to receive others. It agreed to reduce the size of the Conference from 2024 but could not agree how seats should be distributed and directed that the Council determine that in collaboration with the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity Committee. It also agreed to revise its own ways of working and to reduce its length by a day. The Assistant Secretary will bring a separate report to the Council with proposals for a way forward to address these issues.

The recommendation for the creation of the Connexional Council was adopted as a special resolution; this will now be presented to Synods and the Law and Polity Committee and to the 2023 Conference for ratification. The 2023 Conference will need to determine when the Connexional Council will come into being; the earliest date would be September 2024. The Strategy and Resources Committee will do further work this year on which of its functions it recommends to be taken by the Connexional Council or by the Resourcing Committee and which are now redundant. There is more work to be done on the size and constitution of the Connexional Council; the Conference agreed that it should comprise between 18 and 22 persons. That work and further work following from the section of the report (E) on Connexional Committees will need to be taken forward by the Oversight and Trusteeship Task Group (OTTG).

One of the challenges that will be faced in that report is the consequence of the Conference's decision not to receive the section of the report on District reconfiguration. As is laid out in the report on the Constitution of the Conference (MC/22/77), the Conference determined that from 2024 its membership should be 225 and further directed that the proportion of members of the Conference elected by the Synods shall not be less than 70%, so 67 seats remain for those not elected by Synods. This will necessarily therefore need a review of clause 14(2) of the Deed and has sharpened the questions around connexional leadership which are being considered by the Faith and Order Committee and others. It is probably the case that the Connexion will need to live with a degree of inconsistency around this for a few years.

The section of the report on Districts not having been received creates uncertainty about how the processes already in train can be completed. SO 401 gives responsibility to the Council to consider all proposals for changes in the composition of Districts, to consult those Synods and Circuits affected, and to make recommendations to the Conference. It would be reassuring to those Districts that are already in conversation and wishing to continue were the Council to invite them to submit proposals or at least to indicate to the Council the point that they have reached in regional conversations.

Members of the Conference have been consulted following the Conference debate and a summary of those consultations is appended to this report. It became clear that opinion is divided between those who are

resistant to changes in District configuration and those who believe that a radical change in our structures is needed. It was hoped that the Connexional Leaders' Forum would indicate its preference as to a direction of travel but the CLF that was scheduled was cancelled on account of Her late Majesty's funeral. Given the critical role of District Chairs in these discussions, the Oversight and Trusteeship Task Group will work to ensure that there is a consultation with the CLF before the end of this calendar year so that further updates can be reported to the Council in January. In the meantime, the Council and the SRC will need to be aware that projected savings on the budget (£341,000 from not reducing the numbers of District Chairs) will now need to be deferred or found elsewhere.

Part of the proposals presented to the Conference was to enable the deployment of the Connexional Team more effectively by aligning the current LN regions with a new configuration and by offering a greater range of resources if these are deemed to be helpful (eg, property support, Safeguarding, lay employment expertise). Again, this has consequential effects on budget planning as approximately £250,000 of the projected £1.6 million savings (across the four years 21/22-24/25) in the Connexional Team cannot be realized next year as anticipated.

As another consequence of the Conference's decision, the Council now needs to consider the issues raised by Memorial 21 separately and a discussion paper is before the Council on this topic. Senior Managers have for the time being put on hold any consideration of the reconfiguration of the Learning Network. The Council needs to determine whether or not it wants more work to be done in this area at present.

The Council might want to reflect on the journey to this point. The work which the Conference rejected was offered by the Task Group for Regional and District Structure Planning following the Council's direction to it in January of this year. Paragraphs 110 and 111 of the report detail the consultations that were undertaken; clearly, the Conference did not believe that the case had been made for the changes that were proposed and those who will serve on the Oversight and Trusteeship Task Group will welcome any wisdom the Council is able to offer on how consensus might more effectively be sought around whatever future proposals are brought.

Appendix A

Analysis – Questionnaire re District Reviews Post Conference 2022

Members of the Conference were invited to contribute to an online survey during August, to participate in two Zoom calls in September, and to offer any thoughts on the Conference report via e-mail. This report summarizes the survey responses and other responses received. The survey questions were discerned from the recording of the Conference debate.

1. If you voted against the changes, what didn't you like and why?

Blue – Too much change happening in the post pandemic environment.

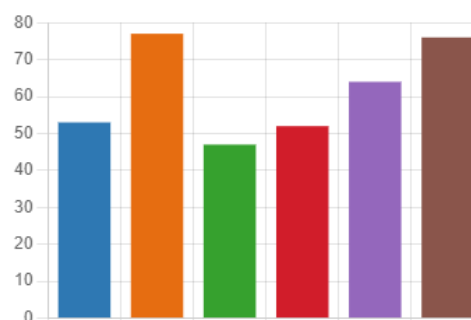
Orange - Impact on the role/ work of the Chair

Green – Impact on the Circuit

Red – Not enough detail on financial matters

Purple – Potential negative impact on current mission focus.

Brown - Other



Where selecting 'Other' the following reasons were given. Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed.

- Loss of connexionalism and issues with District being too big (more travel, hinder mission) (10)
- Not enough conferring across Districts (7)
- Not actually a cost saving measure (5)
- Not bold/radical enough (5)
- Not enough detail/clarity on how it will be of benefit (help mission etc) (3)
- Change should be organic, not directive (it was too top down approach) (2)
- Need less levels (2)
- Tinkering with Districts not the answer (2)
- A number of other responses were listed by one person only (but have not been listed as this summary seeks to draw out the key themes)

2. What aspects of Districts as they currently exist do you think it vital to retain?

Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed.

- Close working of Chairs with ministers (32)
- Pastoral care of Superintendents and ministers (lay and ordained) (28)
- Knowing Circuits and people across the District (19)
- Local knowledge and understanding (people and context) (18)
- Ability to travel to Synods and engage with churches (16)
- Support for mission (13)
- Support for the circuit (13)
- 'Admin' – Property/Safeguarding/Finance/Emplment (10)
- Being connected to the circuits (11)
- Oversight (9)
- Role in stationing (7)

3. Which could be enhanced?

Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed.

- Strategic focus/support for mission (19)
- Sharing resources (possibly smaller Districts joining together) (12)
- More collaborative regional work (9)
- Better communication (8)
- Support for 'professional admin areas' (maybe through paid staff) (7)
- Chair to know people in the District well (7)
- Fellowship across the District (7)
- Sharing of skills across the Districts (6)
- Support of Superintendents/Circuits (5)
- More use of Zoom (hybrid synods) (4)
- More clarity of role of Assistant or Deputy Chairs (4)
- Must be allowed to set policy that can be imposed upon circuits (more clout) (3)
- Move trusteeship functions up a level / have less layers (3)
- District Chair in pastoral role (2)
- More District meetings (2)
- Link between connexional and local decisions (2)

4. What District functions or structures need to be changed or removed?

Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed.

- Safeguarding – increased resource (14) (a number said it should be done connexionally and not by the District)
- Admin taken away from Chairs and DPCs (13)
- Too many meetings and bureaucracy/too big structure (11)
- Too many committees (10)
- Property consents (6)
- Increased focus on mission (5)
- Chair spending too much time on Connexional or Ecumenical bodies (5)
- Finance (4)
- Probation (4)
- Lay employment (4)
- Use of Zoom to reduce costs (4)
- Governance Structures – there is duplication of work being done locally and Connexionally (3)
- Less Districts, bigger size (2)
- Stationing (2)
- Learning Network (2)

5. In not receiving the report the Conference has indicated it didn't want to adopt a connexional formulation for amending district boundaries. This does not preclude districts approaching the Methodist Council themselves if they wish to pursue the changes. Do you feel this is the right direction of travel?

● Yes	112
● No	22



6. Add any comments on question 5 below

Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed.

A range of extensive comments were made making thematic analysis more tricky, although the following themes definitely came up more than once:

- Decisions must come from ground up, not the top down (20)
- Districts can volunteer to merge if they want (13)
- Need an overall Connexional approach (a piecemeal approach is problematic and lacks consistency) (12)
- Need full consultation at every level (4)
- Districts could pick up the costs of District Chairs (3)
- We should not allow any changes (2)
- We don't have time and so we should just get on with this (2)

7. Some of the main drivers of the changes were: to reduce the administrative burden (bearing in mind a declining membership), to reduce the District Assessment, to refocus the role of the District Chair, and to enhance Connexional leadership. Which of these (if any) should work continue on?

● Reduce the administrative burden	95
● Reduce the District Assessment	49
● Refocus the role of the Chair	61
● Enhance Connexional leadership	40
● Other	41



Where selecting 'Other' the following reasons were given. All responses have been listed as there were not many themes that featured more than once.

- None of these (3)
- Reduce the Connexional Team (2)
- No evidence in the report how any of the above will work (2)
- Circuit to be main focus of our life and mission (2)
- Develop Connexional Team to deliver Safeguarding and GDPR requirements and remove resourcing from Districts. (2)
- Are there Connexional roles that can be dispensed with?
- Focus on potential as Districts as units for mission
- Give Districts more autonomy
- Design a fit for purpose model for the future
- By having Assistant Chairs we are making small adjustments while adding to the workload
- Avoid empire building in 'successful' Districts, we are one Connexion.
- Get ministers doing ministry, not administration
- Proposals don't enhance Connexional leadership
- While membership is declining, the geography doesn't change. Too much emphasis on money
- People don't want to enhance Connexional leadership, they want local leadership.
- Connexional leadership can be enhanced by having fewer people involved (change the Deed of Union)
- Refocus on mission

- Share expertise, good practice on a wider platform
- If we refocus the role of Chair they we have to either disconnect the pastoral element or put in a substitute to cover this
- Natural administrators likely to be lay people
- Connexional focus should be missional

8. The aim of the proposals was to cut down on some of the administrative burdens circuits and districts hold. What are the unnecessary burdens in your circuits or district?

Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed. Several responses noted that although administration can be burdensome, the work is necessary.

- Property returns/issues (including speed of response from TMCP) (23)
- Not having enough people to take on roles (including roles with specific expertise eg. property & finance) (13)
- GDPR (10)
- Safeguarding (including training requirements) (9)
- Admin imposed by government/charity commission (8)
- Financial reporting (6)
- Paperwork (5)
- Too many Connexional initiatives from Methodist Church House (5)
- Lay employment (5)
- Admin that leaves ministers with less time to minister (5)
- Too many committees (3)
- Same people having to serve on multiple circuit and district groups (3)
- Legal issues (3)
- Health & Safety (3)
- Supervision (2)
- None (2)
- EDI (2)

9. If you didn't think the proposals were radical enough, what do you think needs to be considered?

A small number of responses said the proposals were fine, or were too radical, or that no change is needed. A number of people gave no response. The below are the responses that actually answered the question. All responses have been listed as there were not many themes that featured more than once.

- Start from scratch to re draw the boundaries (8)
- Remove Districts all together (5)
- 12 or reduced number of regions replacing Districts (3)
- Decide on number of Districts needed and then produce a plan (2)
- Focus/enhance the circuits and structures shaped to support them (2)
- District to have emphasis on mission across a geographical area (2)
- More radical thinking about church trusteeship (2)
- Remove one layer of governance – what if we removed circuits but retained 20-25 Districts? (2)
- External experts in to help
- Change Deed of Union
- Positive thinking about the role of the Chair
- Cost of Chairs borne by Districts
- Move MCH north so CT wage bill cheaper

- Cuts made a Connexional level
- Start again to ask what needed beyond Circuit
- Why does Chair need to be ordained? (Hugh Bourne organised Primitive Methodism without being ordained)
- Stop being a church and start being a movement
- Smaller tightly focussed Districts that are distinctive in their style of ministry
- Make every circuit a congregation, and every district a circuit
- 10 Districts with more flexibility e.g stationing
- Rethink the 40% property levy
- Determine the role of the District Team
- Rethink how stipends are funded
- Make decisions more quickly
- Rather than focus on Districts, think about reimagining administration structures.
- Smarter working, sharing responsibilities across the Districts rather than new ones.
- Slim down Connexional leadership/trusteeship
- Cut costs at District level and refocus the role of Chairs
- Rather than District focus, look at the whole Church from Circuits to the Connexion

10. The impact on finances may mean that the District Assessment will not be decreased as planned. How else might the savings be made?

Only the themes that featured more than once have been listed.

- Review/reduction in Connexional Team (22)
- Review/reduction in the Learning Network (15)
- Reduce travel by use of Zoom etc (9)
- Don't know / not sure (6)
- Let passionate people get on with things rather than using paid specialists (4)
- Cuts to cost of Conference – cheaper hotels, less hot meals (4)
- Districts pay for Chairs themselves (4)
- Connexional level (3)
- Give Methodist people a vision and invite them to give towards it (3)
- Don't have enough information to answer (2)
- Focus on income generation eg rent out properties (2)

Oversight and Trusteeship Feedback

At our Darlington District Leadership team meeting yesterday we discussed fewer Circuits, which may result in Circuits being split between Districts if geography dictates. We commented on the fact that with fewer “supers” it would mean more presbyters able to do the vocation they were called to and as Circuit numbers dropped the next natural progression would be a reduction in Districts as new boundaries formed.

I accept this would be a slower process than perhaps required but with guidelines on membership numbers for a circuit to exist, this could be pushed along at a reasonable rate (we already have 12 as minimum numbers for a church). Next would be minimum number of Circuits for a District to exist.

Hope that helps in the ongoing discussions regarding “taking a layer out”

I think the time for more radical thinking has come – I just want to preserve – (not in a no change way) – the pastoral relationship between minister/circuit and Chair (or sub Chair/local Chair etc) – the Circuit Invitation Committee was a good example of how their role can be effective and impartial locally.

Part of me feels the proposals were heading in the right direction – larger regions to reduce administration and financial burden, and to help circuits in these respects. Being responsive to circuits, that’s key.

If there was opportunity for a more regional approach to property – e.g. appointing someone like Wren to manage our properties, that might bring consistency and begin to avoid the Walworth Road situations. That idea would probably need a wider engagement than just one district. I hear Supers crying out for this as circuits can increasingly not cope – as we know.

I see complaints / safeguarding etc being done on a more regional basis. With zoom etc., this is now all possible.

So compliance needs to be regional.

Stationing – this is done regionally anyway. However, if we lose the ability of the ministers to ‘know’ their chair, the current way of stationing becomes impossible. It relies on the chair knowing the ministers personally. If that were retained, even in several co-chairs, a region is fine.

Synod – I guess we don’t want to go to Kent for synod etc. So do we re-imagine synod – it is a rubber stamp exercise anyway now – can DPE be more representative – can that be online? do we do synod online? Do we have one big regional ‘conference’ per year – attracting more inspirational speakers? I’m not against this re-imagining – but don’t want to travel to Canterbury on a Saturday. In short, why do we do synod – or are we continuing something which worked in the 70s?

The question that I don’t see being asked – although haven’t fully read the report – is what / why are we trying to achieve. If it is admin and money – which is what I am reading from the survey, then, perhaps we just need to downsize. I have for some time felt we have one too many layers in Methodism and districts would be the one to go..

If it is for mission, let’s work out what we want the districts /regions to do. My answer would be

1. Help circuits with compliance issues: SG, property etc. That can all be done regionally.
2. Have a relationship with a more local chair re supervision, stationing, help with local vision etc. That cannot be done on a regional basis if your Chair lives in Canterbury and you live in Watford. But if you had 2/3/4/ co-Chairs, it would work – but perhaps that doesn’t solve the financial situation.

So, my response is,

1. First ask, what are we trying to achieve and why
 2. separate the admin from the pastoral, keep the pastoral local, and the admin regional
 3. don’t burden the Chairs with compliance – hire specialists.
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Let’s just get on with it.

I voted against the changes because they were not radical enough and did not take answer properly the feedback that was given within the appendix to the report. It would appear the whole drive for this is to reduce the numbers at conference and to reduce the Connexional team headcount. That is not a good reason for changing the Districts. The only good reason for

changing the Districts would be to make Districts more effective, this proposal did not clearly set out how that would be the case.

The Connexional team headcount argument would be simply be shifting the cost onto the Districts because the time for the Deputy Chairs would need to be paid for by the District. That is a false saving, Methodism still has to pay it is just funded differently!

The cost of Conference can be addressed in a different way by moving the Conference to a two year cycle. First year physical, second year on line as happened in the first year of the Pandemic. This would require a change to quite a few aspects:

- I would suggest moving to a two year presidency.
- Scheduling, where possible, the most controversial business for the physical conference.
- All reps would be elected for two years to improve continuity with substitutes elected at the Synods. The size of Conference could remain as is. If we reduce the size significantly at this time Conference ceases to be a representative conferring.
- The online part of Conference could be spread out across the year.
- Ordinations should be undertaken on a more local basis this would significantly reduce the Carbon impact of people travelling. The accepting into Full Connexion would need to be thought about but should not be an insurmountable issue.
- Whilst we are on the line of making Conference more effective the Business Committee/Methodist Council/Connexional Council needs to become more assertive and refuse to accept a piece of business without a clear contingency position if the report or part of a report is rejected. Not doing so, leaves Conference in limbo and wastes significant amounts of time.

In 2011 Conference received a report on a significant piece of work in the North West and Mann Districts that addressed the reconfiguration of Districts and looked at possible ways forward. The Report looked at a number of options including creating three Districts from the current seven Districts (Model 3) and creating one Regional District (Model 4). The report concluded that these models would be ineffective at supporting the requirements of local Methodism for the following reasons:

- Networking (it is harder to network with people who are in different contexts)
- Making jobs too big to be managed by volunteers thus increasing costs by employing staff
- increased in-efficiency because of travel times and resultant increased costs (mitigated today to an extent by the use of Technology)
- being less representative (to have even reduced representation Synods would become unmanageable in size)

In the conclusions to the 2011 Report Conference agreed a direction of travel of Networking Districts by moving into a Covenantal relationship as being the most effective solution. It is clear that the authors of the 2022 report did not review nor take note of the 2011 report; most of the objections raised in 2011 re-appear in the 2022 report but have been summarily dismissed with no real answers. This is not an acceptable way forward.

I suggest that the direction of travel of Networking Districts continues and that Conference is reorganised as suggested above.

It is noted that some Districts may be in a place where they will be better served by merging; that is a good reason for making a change, so they should go ahead but it is unlikely that this is the case in the majority of situations.