



Throughout 2008 I held a series of eight meetings which involved representatives from 26 of the Circuits in the District to explore the “Mapping a Way Forward—Regrouping

for Mission” recommendations of the 2007 Conference. Each meeting involved a mixture of lay leaders and ministers from more than one Circuit.

The purposes in holding the meetings were:

- To introduce the “Mapping a Way Forward” proposals;
- To explore the theological background to the proposals;
- To set the proposals in the wider Methodist and ecumenical context;
- To offer people an opportunity to respond to the proposals.

This paper is an attempt to summarise the main issues raised during these conversations and to offer some of my reflections on those issues. I also highlight some possible action that those responsible for leadership in

the Circuits could consider taking as they work with “Mapping a Way Forward.” These meetings were the start of a process in which I and the District Development Enabler, Graham Hindle, would welcome opportunity for further engagement with any Circuit or group of Circuits. We can be contacted through the District Office.

John Hellyer ~ April 2009

MISSION IN CONTEXT

At each of the meetings the central purposes of Circuits were explored by drawing on “Our Calling” and “The Priorities for the Methodist Church.” It is clear that although “Our Calling” is well known people are not very familiar with the Priorities. Although they are not expressed in a particularly memorable way, they were agreed by the Conference as the particular mission priorities which would focus the work of the Methodist Church, so we need to find ways of helping those in leadership within the Church to become more familiar with them and to try to work out what they mean in practice in particular situations.

The varied contexts in which the Circuits and their churches are set is a theme that recurred throughout the conversations. Our approach to mission and the way we need to be organised to be effective will depend on whether the context is coastal towns, a

rural village, or commuter belt. There was consequently widespread concern that the reshaping of Circuits should not be imposed centrally.

Perhaps most importantly some of the conversations reflected concern about and passion for an approach to mission that takes seriously our 21st Century context. In some places people have a real sense of despondency as they can see no end to their experience of decline and so they regarded the conversations with weary cynicism characterized by the cliché “We’re moving the deck chairs on the Titanic.” The danger is that churches where the leadership has this outlook become self fulfilling prophecies because they are not attractive groups for new people who want to ask questions about God and meaning and purpose in life to join.

Others take a more confident approach and want to rise to the challenge of reaching out into their neighbourhoods with imaginative initiatives and are trying to ensure that worship is a meaningful experience which is worthy of God and addresses the real life concerns of people. In these situations some churches are experiencing real growth and there is concern that any reshaping will undermine what is happening

Suggestions for Action

1. *Supported by the Circuit and in consultation with ecumenical partners, each Local Church should, at least every five years, review what it is doing with the help of a facilitator from outside their immediate context.*
2. *The Circuit Meeting should use these reviews as a basis for planning the deployment of staff and the allocation of other resources. These plans should be shared with ecumenical partners and neighbouring Circuits with a view to finding new ways of working together.*
3. *The District should train and appoint a group of people who can facilitate these reviews.*

ECUMENICAL

Ecumenical partnership is fundamental to *The Priorities for the Methodist Church*. We need to be ready to affirm that this commitment has not diminished in the changing ecumenical climate of the past decade. There is clear frustration with the bureaucracy associated with some of the ecumenical models working both at County level and in Local Ecumenical Partnerships. We need to work with our ecumenical partners including the new churches in developing partnerships which have a mission focus.

Tension between ecumenical relationships and partnership between Methodist churches is also real,

but possibly overstated. We need to be honest about how committed we are to both as there is evidence that enthusiasm for supporting anything that does not happen in “our building” is often lacking.

Suggestions for Action

4. *The fresh approach to ecumenical action offered by Hope 08 can be built on in local situations.*
5. *Negotiations at District/Diocese/URC Synod level must continue to try to minimise the burden of duplication that LEPs experience.*

THE PURPOSES OF THE CIRCUIT

Those who came to the meetings reflected some contrasting experiences of Circuit:

- Some from Circuits with a number of strong churches and presbyters with responsibility for one and at most two churches reported Circuit Meetings have little business and meet infrequently with little purpose;
- Other Circuits, with churches of varying sizes, some struggling, reported Circuit Meetings that meet more frequently and are often faced with difficult decisions about deployment of staff and the closure of chapels;

- Some saw the Circuit as another inflexible part of the Methodist system laid down by our constitution which was no longer fit for purpose.

What frustrates people more than anything else is meetings that have no clear purpose, allow no active participation and concentrate on reporting what has gone on in the past rather than thinking prayerfully and creatively about the future.

If we can be clearer about the purpose of the Circuit then we can design a way of organizing the Circuit so it can be effective in that purpose. In our conversations about the purpose of a Circuit words and phrases like support, enable, resource, critical friend, thinking strategically, oversight and accountability were used. If it is to serve a useful purpose it is essential that we explore the potential of the Circuit to offer us more than mere administrative convenience but to make a significant contribution to moving forward in mission.

The report to the Conference of 2005 “*The Nature of Oversight*” said:

The role of the Circuit is expected to be dynamic and changing,... Circuits are to be open “to the energy of the Spirit” and “their development is limited only by their ability to respond to God’s call to engage in mission and ministry for God’s kingdom”. This constant reflection on and reaction

to the mission of God in the world will mean that the role and identity of the Circuit will need to be flexible and fluid, developing appropriate expressions of Methodist Connexional identity within the principles outlined in Standing Orders and *Called to Love and Praise*. Such appropriate expressions can only be achieved by dialogue with the needs of our contemporary situation and, in accordance with God's will, responding to it.

A careful reading of the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church indicates that the number, membership and ways of working for committees in a Circuit are far more flexible than they are sometimes given credit for or allowed to be.

Is it possible that it is our lack of imagination and unwillingness to move out of inherited patterns that prevents us from doing things differently? We need to be open to the possibilities of planning the way in which groups such as Circuit Leadership Teams; Staff Meetings; Circuit Meetings and Preachers' and Worship Leaders' Meetings can do their work in ways that focus on conversations about the developing work of God and the ways in which we are being called to share in that work rather than reporting on the past and recycling last year's agenda. In part this must involve a greater awareness that no meeting is ever a mere business meeting, it is a place where God's people

gather to take counsel and try to prayerfully discern the will of God.

Suggestions for Action

6. *The Circuit should undertake a review of its purpose and then make a plan for any necessary reshaping of their organisation in the light of that purpose.*
7. *Training in leadership should be available for lay and ordained people in Circuit Leadership roles.*

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LOCAL CHURCH AND THE CIRCUIT

In many places there is a deep ambivalence towards the Circuit. In some cases it is because of a strong feeling that the Circuit structures create unnecessary bureaucracy and a series of additional meetings that have little purpose. Others feel that the Circuit can stand in the way of initiatives that Local Churches want to take. It would be healthier if we could understand the Circuit in terms of mutual relationship rather than simply as an administrative structure.

Our constitution envisages a dynamic relationship between Circuit and Local Church – neither can exist without the other. This has roots in a number of biblical images:

- Paul's image of the body of Christ;

- The image in John's Gospel of the vine and branches;
- Trinitarian theology draws attention to the dynamic relationships within the Godhead which can be reflected in human community created and recreated in God's image.

Most people recognised value and potential in the Circuit system which is the local expression of what it means to be part of a Connexional Church. In 1999, the Conference adopted a statement about the nature of the Church which was entitled "Called to Love and Praise." This report referred to "the connexional principle".

How is this 'connexional principle' effected? First, at all levels of the Church, the structures of fellowship, consultation, government and oversight express the inter-dependence of all churches, and help to point up, at all levels, necessary priorities in mission and service. Second, alongside this, as the natural corollary of connexionalism, Local Churches, Circuits and Districts exercise the greatest possible degree of autonomy. This is necessary if they are to express their own cultural identity and to respond to local calls of mission and service in an appropriate way. But their dependence on the larger whole is also necessary for their own continuing vitality and well-being. Such local autonomy may also need to be limited from time to time in the light of the needs of the whole Church.

There are a number of important implications to this principle:

- We should try to apply a principle of subsidiarity, meaning decisions should be taken as close to the grass roots of the Church as possible, by the people most affected by them. The Circuit does not need to be involved in every decision made in a Local Church;
- We are not being true to ourselves when we try to work in isolation but should welcome the God-given opportunity that participation in a Circuit can offer to watch over one another in love;
- Each level of the Church needs to focus on doing only what it can do uniquely and best;
- Ministers need to be aware that they are connexional people, stationed to serve God in the Circuit and not to particular churches. They and Local Churches are enriched by participation in the wider life of the Church, including the District and the wider Connexion.

Suggestions for Action

8. *Circuits should review the way in which the gifts of their ministerial staff are used in order to ensure they are a positive expression of a connexional church.*
9. *Ministers should plan to give some time to the Circuit/District/Connexion.*

10. Circuit activities should be reviewed in the light of the “uniquely and best” principle.

11. Local Churches and Circuits should look for appropriate opportunities to communicate news and information from the wider connexion and to share their news with the wider connexion.

SUPERINTENDENCY

The role of the Superintendent needs particular attention. The District is blessed with a very able group of Superintendents who are beginning to find ways of supporting one another very effectively. The way in which the ministry of the Superintendent is understood and practiced in a Circuit can have a very profound effect on its life.

One major concern is the burden of administration. In some Circuits there is a tendency to leave any job for which a lay person cannot be found to the Superintendent, particularly in relation to employment, property, finance and Safeguarding. The responsibility for ensuring something is done is allowed to become the responsibility for actually doing it. This situation cannot continue and calls for urgent action. Clearly there is work that needs to be done in cutting out unnecessary administration at all levels in the Church, but the fact of life is that to be effective, efficient administration is needed for the purposes of

communication and accountability. The reshaping of Circuits will need to include provision of properly equipped and skilled administrative support which genuinely releases Superintendents for their particular ministry.

Effective leadership is also important. A lot of work has been done on leadership both in the Church and in the world of work. The day of the solitary, self-sufficient leader is now over and we need Superintendents who can build and support effective teams of lay and ordained people who work together to share in leadership, ministry and responsibility.

Suggestions for Action

- Facilitated by someone outside of the group, each Staff Meeting and Circuit Leadership Team should study the Conference Report “What is a Circuit Superintendent?”
- Facilitated by someone outside of the group, Circuit Stewards should have a conversation with the Superintendent to develop a clear understanding of the kind of leadership, support and approach to superintendency that is required in their situation.
- Superintendents should identify what in-service training they need to enable them to undertake their ministry more effectively. E.g. Pastoral supervision; consultancy; leadership; conflict resolution.

- The District Training Officer should ensure that appropriate opportunities for training are made available to Superintendents.

CIRCUIT STAFFING

Some Circuits have a real concern that reshaping Circuits, particularly if it means becoming part of a bigger Circuit, will undermine their current levels of ministerial staffing. This is particularly the case in those Circuits where there are presbyters with pastoral responsibility for one Local Church. This thinking is unrealistic in the current situation. As the mismatch between the number of Circuits seeking ministers and the numbers of ministers available continues, all Circuits are going to face uncertainty about sustaining current levels of ministerial staff. It is sometime argued that sustaining the growth of a church depends on keeping the current level of ministerial staffing and even that a particular Presbyter needs to be available to lead worship “in their own church” every Sunday. The evidence for these assumptions is questionable and they imply an unhealthy dependence on ministers which is inconsistent with our tradition of lay ministry and leadership.

The healthiest Circuits seem to be those that have developed a “mixed economy” of staffing that includes, presbyters, deacons and lay people, some of whom are paid and others who work in a voluntary capacity, some

of whom are part-time and others full-time. Staff teams of this kind provide opportunities for flexibility when managing issues like long term illness, maternity leave, vacancies and sabbaticals. They also provide the opportunity for the creation of more specialist roles that complement one another within the team rather than expecting everyone to be a general practitioner who is competent in every area of ministry. Such a staff team can only be developed as a result of careful planning at the Circuit level which is why Standing Order 570 (c) says that Local Church Council appointments must be submitted to the Circuit Meeting for approval. Too often in the past appointments have been made by Local Churches because they could afford them and not on the basis of the greatest need in the Circuit.

There is scope for an individual Circuit or a group of Circuits to think creatively about posts that could be created. This could include people who are paid to deal with for example building maintenance, administration and finance as well as the creation of posts to work in a variety of pioneer ministries. Those responsible for leadership in a Circuit are in a good position to discern where new opportunities need to be grasped, such as the development of new housing estates and the development of fresh expressions. Inevitably smaller Circuits are limited in their capacity to develop this kind of “mixed economy” staff team but this needs to

be balanced against the practical concerns about creating geographically large Circuits. It may be that there are situations where Circuits could co-operate in creating some joint appointments without formally coming together.

The management of these staff teams will bring new challenges in order to ensure that the best possible standards of employment practice are met in terms of recruitment, selection, management and supervision. This will include regular appraisal and offering in-service opportunities for professional development and learning.

Circuits of all sizes are faced with the challenge of finding suitably qualified and experienced people to fill the appointments they create. The solution to this requires longer term planning at all levels of the Church for the way we help people to learn as disciples and to discern their vocations. We also have to be realistic about the difficulties faced in recruiting people, including ministers, to work in some areas of the District.

Staffing needs should also be seen to include the work that needs to be done by lay leaders and officers. The role of Circuit Stewards and Treasurers, for example, is demanding and time consuming as well as rewarding. We need a realistic view of what lay leaders and Circuit officers are required so it can be matched with the

people available. It is also important that all work done by both lay and ordained people is understood as ministry that is undertaken in response to the call of God.

Suggestions for Action

- 12. Each Circuit Meeting should adopt a budgeted plan for staffing the Circuit for the next three to five years. This plan needs to be reviewed regularly in consultation with the District Chair as part of the Stationing process. These plans should be shared with ecumenical partners and neighbouring Circuits with a view to finding new ways of working together.*
- 13. In consultation with our ecumenical partners, particularly the URC, the District needs to develop a policy in relation to the deployment of ministers.*
- 14. Each Circuit or group of Circuits should try to appoint a person who has responsibility for ensuring there is best practice in terms of the management of lay employees who will work in consultation with the District Lay Employment Consultant.*
- 15. The District Training Officer should ensure that appropriate opportunities for training are made available to all Lay Employees and that those responsible for their management are also aware of these opportunities.*

FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CIRCUIT

Taking up any of these suggestions also needs to be done as part of an action/reflection approach to moving forward. One significant way we can discern what God wants us to do in a given context in terms of mission is to get on and do what we believe is right and then to reflect on that in the light of our prayerful immersion in the scriptures and our traditions. On the basis of the reflection we can then change or modify what we do next. Part of that reflection might include taking up some of the suggestions made above. This kind of approach helps us to avoid the temptation of simply tinkering with the way we are organised in a way that distracts us from God-centred worship and Christ-like service in our communities.

It would be impossible for any Circuit to take up all of the suggestions for action in a short space of time, which is why the Mapping a Way Forward process envisages a period of up to five years being spent on these things. It is to be hoped that we will see a variety of “Fresh Expressions” of Circuit developing in that time. One of the ways we can help each other and in which the District can provide support is through the sharing of good practice and the offering of examples of models of Circuit that might be appropriate in different contexts. The creation of United Areas in the District can also provide insights into new ways of

understanding the purpose of Circuits and how they should be organised.

Possible models include:

- A federation of Circuits;
- The Ecumenical United Area;
- The Circuit with one or two larger churches that actively become the hub for a group of smaller churches;
- The porous boundary where Circuits share some of their resources with one another;
- The realignment of current Local Church groupings to form fewer Circuits.

Suggestions for Action

16. Informal meetings between Ministers and leadership teams of neighbouring Circuits should be encouraged.

THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT

In a District that has churches situated in many diverse contexts it is obvious that there is not one model of Circuit that can be followed in the same way everywhere.

The Mapping a Way Forward process, along with the *Stationing Review Report* does however challenge us not to accept the status quo and to seriously explore the possibility of having fewer Circuits. If such a reshaping

based on a mission imperative is to happen it will need the support of Local Churches and Circuits. For this reason the starting place for this reshaping needs to be based on building relationships between the existing Circuits and being open to where the Spirit is guiding rather than creating a centralised plan.

Those who work for the District are in the position of being able to develop an overview of what is happening and to encourage the sharing of stories and good practice. The appointment of the Connexionally funded District Development Enabler also means that someone can be made available to Circuits to facilitate their thinking and conversations.

The Way Forward

Each Circuit or group of Circuits should consult the District Development Enabler to explore the ways in which he can offer support to them.

Each Circuit is asked to feedback to the District (via the District Development Enabler, no later than September 2009) what they are doing or where they are up to in the *Mapping a Way Forward — Regrouping for Mission Process*.

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Please use this paper as a means for conversation/discussion/study in your local churches, house-groups, Circuit-groups etc.

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