

45. Report of the Working Party on Accessibility to the Conference

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Status of Paper	Final report
Action Required	Decision
Resolutions	<p>45/1. The Conference receives the Report.</p> <p>45/2. The Conference adopts recommendation 1 and directs the Methodist Council to agree the terms of reference for a working party, and to appoint such a working party which shall report to the Council and the Conference no later than 2017.</p> <p>The Conference further directs that the terms of reference for the working party shall include further consideration of the issue of accessibility, not just the logistics of running the Conference, but how people can engage with the Conference, regardless of experience, ability or confidence, challenging itself to engage in a radical rethink. The membership of the working party shall include those who have expertise in these areas.</p> <p>45/3. The Conference adopts recommendation 2 and 12 and directs Districts and the Conference Secretariat to implement points a – f of paragraph 6.1 of the Report.</p> <p>45/4. The Conference directs the Secretary of the Conference to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Oversee consideration of recommendation 3 with a view to making arrangements for the earliest possible dissemination of Conference reports; (ii) Implement recommendation 4; (iii) Ensure that appropriate advice is given to the President and Vice-President so that recommendation 5 can be implemented. <p>45/5. The Conference adopts recommendations 6-11 and refers them to the Business Committee for consideration and implementation as necessary.</p>

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	It is about the accessibility of the Conference and offers recommendations on how representatives may prepare for and participate in it more effectively. The report responds to the Notice of Motion mentioned below.
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility to the Conference – who attends and for how long? • Preparation for the Conference – what can be done beforehand? • At the Conference – how can more people participate more effectively? • After the Conference – how to improve feedback to Districts and Circuits?

Background Context and Relevant Documents	Notice of Motion 208 (2013): Accessibility to the Conference
Standing Orders	The adoption of resolution 2 will require an amendment to SO 417(5).
Financial	The adoption of resolution 1 will incur modest travel expenses for meetings. The other resolutions have no material cost implications.
Consultations	The opinions of the representatives to the 2014 Conference on a variety of issues were surveyed [see Appendix 2]. This report has been shared with the EDI Forum, as intimated in the Notice of Motion.

45. Report of the Working Party on Accessibility to the Conference

1. Background

- 1.1 The April 2014 meeting of the Methodist Council approved the establishment of a Working Party (WP) to address the matter of accessibility to the Conference: see appendix 1 for the Council paper MC/14/45.
- 1.2 The WP then met twice and brought an interim report for the January 2015 Council's consideration (see paper MC/15/16): Council members spent a short time in buzz groups reflecting on the ideas proposed and any others they wished to suggest. A survey of the opinions of the representatives to the 2014 Conference was also carried out. The WP met again, considered the input from the Council, the results of the survey and prepared its final report which the April 2015 meeting of the Council considered and decided upon its recommendations to the Conference.
- 1.3 For clarification, the WP ascertained from the proposers of the Notice of Motion at the Conference of 2013 what they meant by 'accessibility'. It was verified that it is not physical access or incapacity provision but how to enable all Conference members, not least those attending for the first (and perhaps only) time, to engage in its agenda and proceedings in a more participative and purposeful way. The observation has been made that a relatively few members can dominate Conference debates¹ – not that their wisdom is unwelcome – and new members can find the whole experience somewhat overwhelming, beginning with a 600-page Agenda a few weeks beforehand.

2. Previous Conference reviews

The WP read the reports of various groups which have reviewed the Conference since 2004, noting that the substantive reports relevant to its remit were in 2005² and 2006³. Indeed, it became apparent that many of the issues the WP discussed had been covered by the 2006 report, though not all of its recommendations have been wholly achieved. We are indebted to the work of our predecessors and seek to reinforce many of their recommendations.

3. Participation in the Conference

- 3.1 The WP acknowledges that not everyone can speak on every item of Conference business and that many people participate thoughtfully but silently in its proceedings. Members often come

¹ Some light was thrown on this matter from the survey – see Appendix 2.

² Conference 2005 Agenda item 7, pages 146 to 156.

³ Conference 2006 Agenda item 41, pages 317 to 352.

carefully prepared to contribute to debates, only to hear ‘their speech’ made by someone else first. Some items of business stimulate great interest and attract long queues of willing and waiting speakers whilst others go through, on the nod, without comment.

- 3.2 The 2013 Notice of Motion expressed the conviction that, in the maelstrom of the purposes and constraints of the Conference, there is a frustration amongst many members that they are unable to participate effectively, do not always understand what is happening, thereby feel disenfranchised and wonder why they came. Some find public speaking difficult at the best of times, let alone in the cut and thrust of a hurried Conference debate. People have different styles of engagement and learning and may find the established culture of the Conference daunting and even alien at first.
- 3.3 The WP acknowledges that there are twin goals, not always easily aligned and indeed sometimes at odds, as the Conference prosecutes its business within a limited timescale: first, to deal with the content of business to reach decisions or outcomes and secondly, to enable members to confer and contribute through participative processes.
- 3.4 With the premise that there is scope for improvement and building on the previous reviews and recommendations, the WP brings a variety of recommendations under four main headings:
 - Accessibility to the Conference – who attends and for how long?
 - Preparation for the Conference – what can be done beforehand?
 - At the Conference – how can more people participate more effectively?
 - After the Conference – how to improve feedback to the District and Circuits?

First, a note on the survey carried out.

4. Survey of the representatives to the 2014 Conference

- 4.1 The survey results referred to in the text are those having a bearing on the immediate point being made, but the analysis of the survey results is given in Appendix 2. Attention is drawn to this analysis as it contains much interesting information.
- 4.2 Of the maximum of 306 possible responses, 148 were received, almost equally distributed between ordained and lay, between male and female, and across a wide range of age groups. The WP regards the response rate of 48% as giving strong indications of views without significant bias.

5. Accessibility to the Conference – who attends and for how long?

5.1 Who attends?

The Conference is rightly equally balanced between lay and ordained members, and the latter generally have no constraints on their availability to attend if they wish and are elected. Mindful of the provisions of SO 417(2) with respect to age, sex and ethnic origin⁴, the demographic results of the survey of 2014 Conference representatives indicates that a higher proportion of lay members (20%) than ordained (8%) are under 40 years of age, but 59% of lay members are aged 61+ years, compared with 23% of ordained (who usually retire in mid-60s). It appears highly probable that many lay people of working age simply cannot commit time from work which, unless they have a generous employer, eats up four or five days of their

⁴ The survey just asked for information about age and gender, as well as lay or ordained identity.

annual holiday entitlement. Some are known to take time off work without pay. Indeed, the fewest lay people were in the 41-50 years band.

The WP recognises that its remit does not extend to proposing a radical reshaping of the period and overall pattern of the Conference which may have major repercussions but it does recommend to the Conference that consideration is given to establishing a further Group with a broader representation to examine what might be possible to enable more lay people of working age to attend.

Whilst it is imperative that the Conference retains its constitutional roles, includes times of worship and upholds certain celebrations and traditions with dignity, the WP suggests that by making better use of the Saturday and Sunday (which, it is believed, many representatives would welcome), there are options which bear scrutiny that could enable the length of the Conference to be reduced by at least one day.

Some members of the WP are willing to serve on a newly constituted Group if that would be helpful and their internal discussion papers can be made available.

Recommendation 1

It is recommended that the Conference establish a new Working Group, with wider terms of reference and representation, to examine ways in which the overall length of the Representative Session might be reduced without compromising its roles and purposes.

5.2 For how long?

SO 417 governs the election of District representatives to the Conference and SO 105(6) explains how representatives may be elected for one, two or three years. It is noted that the nine Conference-elected representatives are elected for three years.

The suggestion that Districts could nominate representatives at the Spring Synod the year before – thereby enabling them to attend that year's Conference as observers – was considered, but discounted as largely impractical: first, it would be too long before to guarantee availability, and secondly, the question of time commitment and cost could be prohibitive. However, anyone who might consider being nominated could be encouraged to attend as they are able.

The survey revealed that, in 2014, only 16% of respondents were attending for the first time and 13% for the second time: thus, for 71% it was at least their third visit. (At the other end of the scale, 29% were attending for at least their tenth, but it needs to be borne in mind that this will include long-serving District Chairs and connexional officers.) The Conference is not as inexperienced as might be imagined.

The WP suggests that encouraging more people to attend for three (or even two) years would render their contribution to the Conference more effective whilst being aware of the possible drawbacks of reducing the number of different people attending and militating against lay working people because of time commitment. There is a balance of conflicting objectives to be struck, but in terms of participation and effectiveness, the WP leans towards more people being elected for two or three years where possible.

Whilst the WP is not proposing to change the SOs by introducing a compulsory gap, the practice of 'dodging between qualifications' (eg three years as Conference-elected, followed by three years as a district representative) was not viewed as wholly healthy.

6. Preparation for the Conference – what can be done beforehand?

6.1 District meetings

The WP is aware that Districts arrange pre-Conference briefing meetings for those attending (as directed by SO 417(5)), and WP members reflected (from their own experiences) that these helpful events vary in format, perhaps seem rather too optional and exclude Conference members who are not District representatives⁵ (such as Conference-elected, Youth, Racial Justice, Conference officers etc). We are not being critical of what is offered or achieved.

The WP recommends (not least with strong support from the survey results) that the district briefing meetings should aim to enable the Conference to be more accessible to all those attending, and should:

- a. be more formal, covering the procedures and ways of working of the Conference (paying particular attention to the Notice of Motion procedures) as well as Agenda subjects
- b. particularly include Agenda information, available from the February meeting of the Conference Business Committee and April meeting of the Methodist Council, on major items of business
- c. be an obligatory, rather than optional, element of attending the Conference – so that the aficionados who do not need them as induction can impart their knowledge and experience (maybe give formal input)
- d. include formal standard briefing material prepared by the Conference Business Committee and the Secretariat⁶
- e. include, by invitation, other Conference members resident or stationed in the District, not just the elected District representatives
- f. be allocated sufficient time to achieve their objective and on a date fixed sufficiently beforehand to facilitate attendance.

It is noted that the recommendation to include non-District representatives, by invitation⁷, in these briefings is primarily to enable them to be familiarised with the processes and pattern of the Conference and to impart their own experiences. It is important that all Conference members are mindful that they are representatives from particular constituencies in the Church and, as such, may have different views on the content of business and resolutions in the Conference Agenda.

In 2014, the York and Hull District shot a video of the Conference experience of its representatives which gives a flavour, especially to newcomers, of what lies in store for them. The WP commends this excellent initiative and suggests that the possibility of some core material being prepared and made available to districts by the Media Office be followed up.

⁵ Indeed, SO 417(5) specifically says 'district representatives'.

⁶ In addition to the material normally published in the Conference Agenda, which includes SOs on procedures, the recently prepared (re-published) paper 'A Guide to the Methodist Conference' is welcomed. It would also be helpful if a short introductory video was available and perhaps offered via YouTube to the Conference first-timers.

⁷ The word 'invitation' releases those who feel it would be inappropriate to attend, eg members of the Presidency and Secretariat.

Recommendation 2

It is recommended that District briefings be organised and constituted as above and the preparation of core material for an introductory video be pursued.

6.2 Online forums

The WP quotes paragraph 9 of the 2006 review.

A Conference website and other facilities be set up to provide facilities for members of the Conference to discuss items of business and other matters of concern with each other in advance of the Conference, and then provide material to help representatives disseminate the news and thinking of the Conference after it has met.

This would be for Conference members only six months before and after it meets.

It is recalled that this facility was started in 2007, ran for about three years, but by 2010 was little used by few people and has not since been reinstated. Its administration was also labour-intensive for MCH staff and it relied on authors of Agenda reports actively responding to comments and queries (which, we believe, was also patchy).

The WP recognises that in the intervening eight years the use of electronic communications (not least social media⁸) has grown rapidly and that some form of online forum may now be welcomed and more readily adopted. It would be a private forum for Conference members only which could be set up for a modest cost (less than £1000)⁹. Bearing in mind that authors of reports are often busy in the run-up to Conference, they would need to be notified by email if comments and questions are raised so that they may respond. The updating of the forum would cease just before the beginning of the Conference as its use during proceedings would be distracting and that, as its value after the Conference is considerably diminished, it is not further updated and deleted at the end of October.

After a discussion in which the drawbacks¹⁰ as well as benefits were articulated, the WP's suggestion that online forums be reinstated for a further trial period did not gain the support of the Council.

6.3 Conference Agenda (Publication timing)

The WP is aware of the pressures on the authors to submit their reports by the required deadlines (for successive volumes), given the short time available after the April meeting of the Methodist Council. We also recognise the huge effort required by members of the Connexional Team to enable the Agenda volumes to be published and distributed. It is stating the obvious to suggest that authors must meet deadlines.

However, given that many reports change little after their passage through Council, the WP suggests that Conference representatives (who clamour to receive the Agenda as soon as possible to give them a chance to read it) could be encouraged, via email, to access the reports on the website after the April Council meeting. It is understood that if a report requires significant amendment, then it would not be helpful to suggest it be read.

⁸ The WP notes that there is extensive sharing of views amongst some Conference members on the public social media facilities, over which the Conference has no control or authority.

⁹ The suggestion that the facility could be set up on Facebook was dismissed on the grounds that some people would not use it and that a focused facility, fit for purpose, is needed.

¹⁰ The main drawback highlighted is the potential prohibitive workload imposed on a small number of key people for whom the run-up to the Conference is already extremely pressured.

Recommendation 3

It is recommended that the Conference Secretariat give consideration to enabling reports to be available on the website at the earliest possible opportunity after the April Council, before the hard copy publication, and advising Conference representatives accordingly.

6.4 Conference Agenda (Cover sheet and Summary)

The WP recognises that the cover sheet at the beginning of each Agenda item is a most helpful innovation, but further suggests that its importance is emphasised to authors, and that the 'Summary of Contents' section be as full as necessary (but not more than two pages) especially when the subject matter is of major importance in the life of the Church. This should act as an Executive Summary, so that the key points of the report can be appreciated. However, reading a summary does not absolve Conference representatives, as Charity Trustees, of their responsibility to be fully informed of the full content of a report so they may exercise their proper duties diligently and legally under Charity Commission law. The WP is not recommending that the Conference drifts into decisions on the basis of report summaries.

It is emphasised that the cover sheet and summary must be prepared by the authors of reports and not left to the Governance Support officers to complete afterwards.

Recommendation 4

It is recommended that report authors are directed to complete the cover sheet/template fully and to include an Executive Summary of their report.

7. At the Conference – how can more people participate more effectively?

7.1 Initial briefings for new Conference members

For many years, briefing sessions were arranged for new Conference members, usually on the Saturday morning. Whilst a worthy objective, it became fraught with difficulties which included (1) the convenience of travel to the Conference venue and shared travel arrangements, (2) the relative location of the Conference hall and accommodation, (3) the start time of the Conference and (4) the other preparatory activities which must take precedence on Saturday mornings.

For two years, the briefing has been made available electronically but will be reinstated as a Saturday morning meeting in 2015. Whilst the WP suggested that the enhanced District Briefings could supersede the Conference Saturday briefings, the Council indicated its wish that they should continue.

7.2 First-time speaker card

The survey revealed that 37% of respondents¹¹ did not speak in debates: but, more positively, 63% did so – again perhaps a higher % than may have been imagined. Not surprisingly, first-time attendees tended to speak only once or twice, but 48% did so. Only 12% spoke more than 4 times.

The WP believes the first-time speaker card to be extremely positive and notes that it applies only to the very first time someone speaks. It is suggested that all first-time speakers are

¹¹ The WP has speculated that people who responded to the survey were perhaps more likely to have spoken in the Conference, but we submit the survey analysis as a large representative sample.

always given priority once an item of business has been introduced and that their speech allocation is never shortened. Greater publicity can be given to this arrangement at the beginning of the Conference.

Recommendation 5

It is recommended that first-time speakers are always given priority and that their speech time is not shortened.

7.3 Assistance with preparation of Notices of Motion

The WP values the offer made by certain individuals to assist in preparation of Notices of Motion, but again suggests that it be advertised more prominently at the start of the Conference and made known in the District briefing meetings.

7.4 Planned debates

Speakers in debates in the Church of England General Synod must seek approval to do so, submit their main points beforehand and, if selected to speak, stick to their script. The WP does not believe this is a helpful model for general application at the Methodist Conference, but does suggest that (as paragraph 14 in the 2006 review did), for major debates and to ensure a balanced spectrum of views can be heard, some form of prior debate planning would be useful. The 2006 recommendation has been rarely invoked.

The WP is aware of the perils of any attempt to manipulate or stifle debates or to restrain conferring, but recommends that there are rare occasions when some element of planning would be beneficial to ensure that all points of view are heard proportionately and recommends that the Conference Business Committee keeps this in mind.

Recommendation 6

It is recommended that, on (rare) occasions when it is deemed beneficial, the Conference Business Committee plans the pattern of input in debates.

7.5 Hearings

The 2006 review made three recommendations about the Conference meeting in different formats, viz Hearings, Workshops and Reference Groups. Each has been used since, perhaps not as much as might have been possible and not always strictly for the purpose intended. Equally, these facilities must not simply be used for their own sake – but only when they serve the purpose for which they were proposed.

In paragraph 12 (of the 2006 review), preliminary Hearings, on a day prior to the debate, were suggested as a means of enabling authors of major or controversial reports to answer questions of detail and fact in order to facilitate members' understanding of the issues. These are similar to the Login sessions used at 3Generate. Noting that suggestions by the Conference Business Committee in recent years to report authors to have Hearings have been declined, it is suggested that as much use should be made of these as possible and that they could be run in parallel.

Recommendation 7

It is recommended that authors of major reports give serious consideration to the value of Hearings prior to the main item of business, and that the Conference Business Committee gives guidance and encouragement to them as appropriate.

7.6 Workshops

Paragraph 11 of the 2006 review recommended workshops for the “mutual exploration and open-ended discernment of matters for which there is no report or set of resolutions in the formal agenda”. They were used, for example, in 2007 when the Stationing Review Project was halfway through its work in order to test the mind of the Conference on various suggestions, and enabled Conference members to engage in smaller groups on focused issues. Some feedback indicates that, more recently, workshops have been less well received because presenters’ speeches lasted too long or the subject matter appeared unrelated to any business of the Conference.

The WP believes that workshops, properly planned and managed, can enable more Conference members to feel engaged in its business.

Recommendation 8

It is recommended that the Conference Business Committee exercises its judgment in advising authors of reports (sometimes bringing the business the following year) on the appropriate use and pattern of Workshops as effective instruments for dealing with matters on which the views of Conference representatives will be valued.

7.7 Reference Groups

Paragraph 13 of the 2006 review introduced parallel Reference Groups¹² to work on specialised topics which do not interest all members. In 2011, these became parallel sessions of the Conference, chaired by an ex-President or ex-Vice-President. The intention is that the resolutions of these Groups are adopted by the full Conference *en bloc*. Not only does this save time, but because the Groups are smaller and less intimidating, they encourage more participation – as indeed they did in 2011. The drawback is finding enough members of the Secretariat to staff them.

The WP believes that, where appropriate and practical, such Groups present opportunities for increased involvement and conferring and can ease time pressures when the Agenda/programme becomes unduly full.

Recommendation 9

It is recommended that, in planning the programme of business, the Conference Business Committee always considers how such Reference Groups and/or Parallel Sessions can facilitate the work of the Conference.

7.8 Buzz Groups

The WP observes that the recent practice of inviting representatives to share in buzz groups with those around them has been welcomed. Short bursts of focused conversation are effective means of breaking up the 2-hour sessions of relative inactivity (for most), offer opportunity for everyone to chip in, genuinely contribute to debate and enhance the sense of participation. In order to avoid their over-use, presenters would be asked to indicate their intention to the Conference Business Committee beforehand.

¹² Not to be confused with Committees of Reference, which are small groups called during the Conference to examine a particular issue on which specialist advice is required.

Recommendation 10

It is recommended to presenters (with the knowledge and guidance of the Conference Business Committee) that they use buzz groups whenever their business would benefit from them.

7.9 Electronic voting

The Conference of 2011 used electronic voting for some of its debate votes. It was decided by the Conference Business Committee and Conference Planning Executive afterwards not to repeat the practice until further notice, basically as the costs, it was then judged, outweighed the benefits. That may still be the case, as there are usually very few close call votes. The significant benefit is that a secret vote enables people more readily to express their view and not be influenced by those around them whom they may perceive as opinion-shapers. On some controversial and sensitive topics, some people are reluctant – even fearful – of disclosing their view and the facility to hold a secret ballot is surely imperative.

The WP is not suggesting that the Conference takes time using electronic voting on every occasion, when resolutions will evidently 'go through on the nod', but we believe that its availability has become too important to ignore, that individual's voting intentions on any matter are part of their access to and participation in the Conference and therefore within our remit.

Recommendation 11

It is recommended that the provision of electronic voting facilities be referred to the Conference Planning Executive and/or Conference Business Committee for further consideration.

8. After the Conference – how to improve feedback to the District and Circuits?

- 8.1 The WP focused its main attention, following its remit, on preparation for the Conference and participation in it, but we also considered how the wider Church accesses its decisions and outcomes. It may be that learning of the Conference's proceedings inspires others to seek nomination to attend in the future.
- 8.2 The WP members shared their personal recollections of post-Conference briefings – mostly in Autumn Synods, various District Committees and occasionally Circuit Meetings. Some presentations to Synod were short fun items, sharing the general experience, whilst others offered in-depth summaries of the outcomes on major topics. There is much good practice across the Connexion.
- 8.3 In 2014, the Connexional Team produced an information leaflet summarising the decisions and outcomes of the Conference and intends to do so annually. This can be widely circulated as part of the dissemination process.
- 8.4 Whilst the WP does not bring prescriptive ideas, we do urge that all Districts ensure that the whole team of District representatives – not just for example the Chair and Secretary – is encouraged to embrace participation in post-Conference feedback as part of their commitment. Indeed, perhaps representatives need to be reminded that the Conference merely adjourns its meeting on the Thursday lunch-time, and that they remain members of the Conference for the year: they could even be called back!

Recommendation 12

It is recommended that, in seeking to achieve best practice across the Connexion, Districts encourage and enable all representatives to participate in disseminating feedback from the Conference to the District and Circuits in whatever ways are appropriate.

Summary of Recommendations

- 1. It is recommended that the Conference establish a new Working Group, with wider terms of reference and representation, to examine ways in which the overall length of the Representative Session might be reduced without compromising its roles and purposes. (section 5.1)**
- 2. It is recommended that District briefings be organised and constituted as described in section 6.1.**
- 3. It is recommended that the Conference Secretariat office give consideration to enabling reports to be available on the website at the earliest possible opportunity after the April Council, before the hard copy publication, and advising Conference representatives accordingly (section 6.3).**
- 4. It is recommended that report authors are directed to complete the cover sheet/template fully and to include an Executive Summary of their report (section 6.4).**
- 5. It is recommended that first time speakers are always given priority and that their speech time is not shortened (section 7.2).**
- 6. It is recommended that, on (rare) occasions when it is deemed beneficial, the Conference Business Committee plans the pattern of input in debates (section 7.4).**
- 7. It is recommended that authors of major reports give serious consideration to the value of Hearings prior to the main item of business, and that the Conference Business Committee gives guidance and encouragement to them as appropriate (section 7.5).**
- 8. It is recommended that the Conference Business Committee exercises its judgment in advising authors of reports (sometimes bringing the business the following year) on the appropriate use and pattern of Workshops as effective instruments for dealing with matters on which the views of Conference representatives will be valued (section 7.6).**
- 9. It is recommended that, in planning the programme of business, the Conference Business Committee always considers how Reference Groups and/or Parallel Sessions can facilitate the work of the Conference (section 7.7).**
- 10. It is recommended to presenters (with the knowledge and guidance of the Conference Business Committee) that they use buzz groups whenever their business would benefit from them (section 7.8).**
- 11. It is recommended that the provision of electronic voting facilities be referred to the Conference Planning Executive and/or Conference Business Committee for further consideration (section 7.9).**
- 12. It is recommended that, in seeking to achieve best practice across the Connexion, Districts encourage and enable all representatives to participate in disseminating feedback from the Conference to the District and Circuits in whatever ways are appropriate (section 8).**

*****RESOLUTIONS**

45/1. The Conference received the Report.

45/2. The Conference adopted recommendation 1 and directed the Methodist Council to agree the terms of reference for a working party, and to appoint such a working party which shall report to the Council and the Conference no later than 2017.

The Conference further directs that the terms of reference for the working party shall include further consideration of the issue of accessibility, not just the logistics of running the Conference, but how people can engage with the Conference, regardless of experience, ability or confidence, challenging itself to engage in a radical rethink. The membership of the working party shall include those who have expertise in these areas.

45/3. The Conference adopted recommendation 2 and 12 and directs Districts and the Conference Secretariat to implement points a – f of paragraph 6.1 of the Report.

45/4. The Conference directed the Secretary of the Conference to:

- (i) Oversee consideration of recommendation 3 with a view to making arrangements for the earliest possible dissemination of Conference reports;**
- (ii) Implement recommendation 4;**
- (iii) Ensure that appropriate advice is given to the President and Vice-President so that recommendation 5 can be implemented.**

45/5. The Conference adopted recommendations 6-11 and refers them to the Business Committee for consideration and implementation as necessary.

Appendix 1

Working Party to consider the accessibility of the Conference

MC/14/45

The 2013 Conference passed the following motion:

Notice of Motion 208

The Conference confers every year around issues that are important to the church and to the society within which we live. Therefore, it is important that people from all parts of the church are able to engage in the way the Conference does its business and can engage in these issues.

The Conference recognises there is work to be done to improve the accessibility of the Conference, making use of the learning in the field of participation which has taken place over the past five years, and taking into account the full breadth of traditions, cultures and ages within the church.

The Conference directs the Methodist Council to appoint a working party to consider, in consultation with the EDI Stakeholder Forum, ways of making the Conference more accessible and to report to the Conference in 2015 with any recommendations for how accessibility to the Conference could be improved.

The Council is asked to appoint the following as members of the working party;

Co Chairs: Mr John A Bell (Former Vice-President and Chair of the Conference Business Committee)

Mr Sam Taylor (Proposer of the Notice of Motion)

The Revd Ashley R Cooper (Member of the Conference Business Committee)

The Revd Jennifer M Dyer (Journal Secretary)

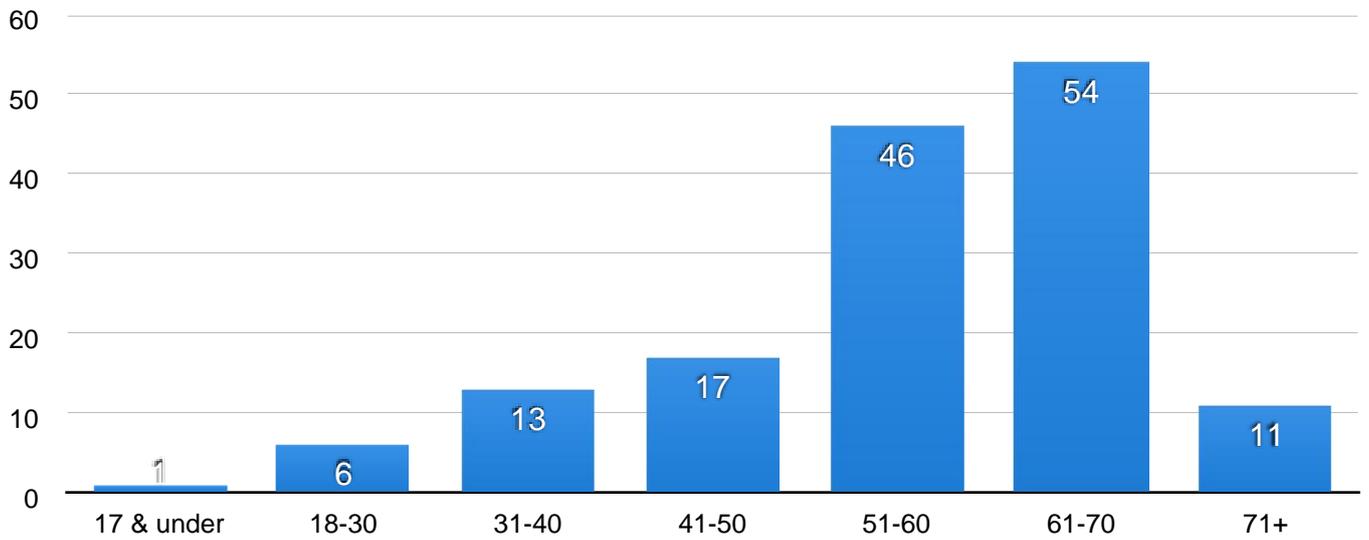
Ms Tamara Wray (Youth President)

The Council appointed the working party as set out.

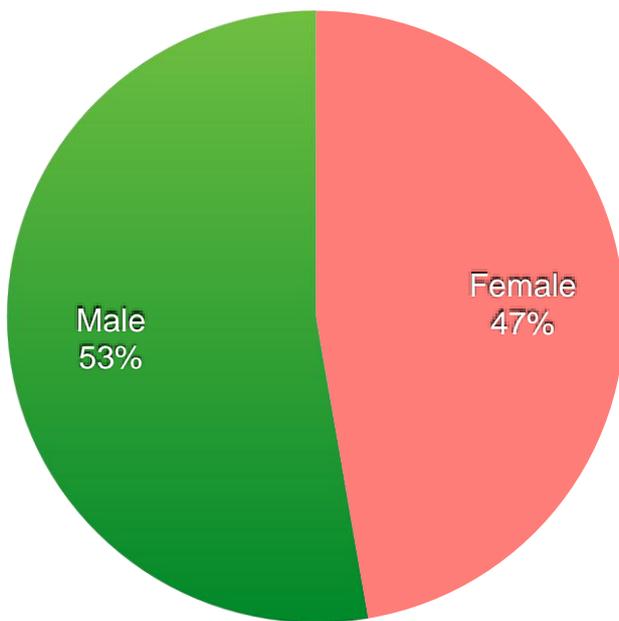
Appendix 2
Results of Survey of Conference 2014 Representatives

Summary of Responses (Total of 148 Responses)

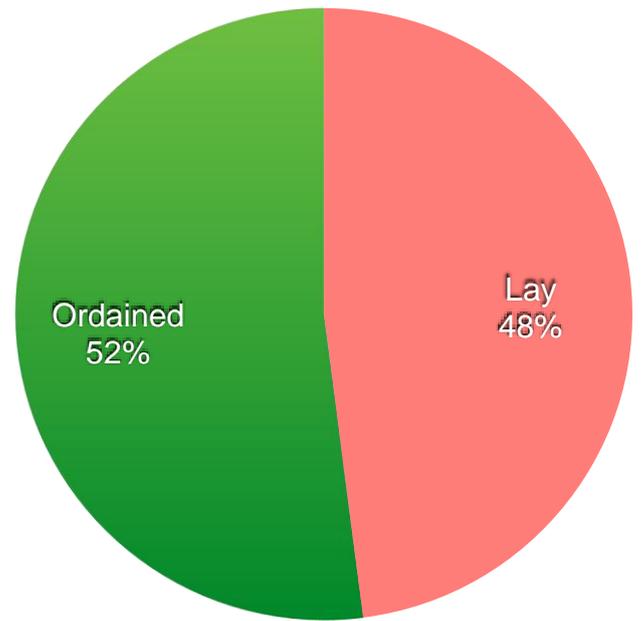
Q1: Age



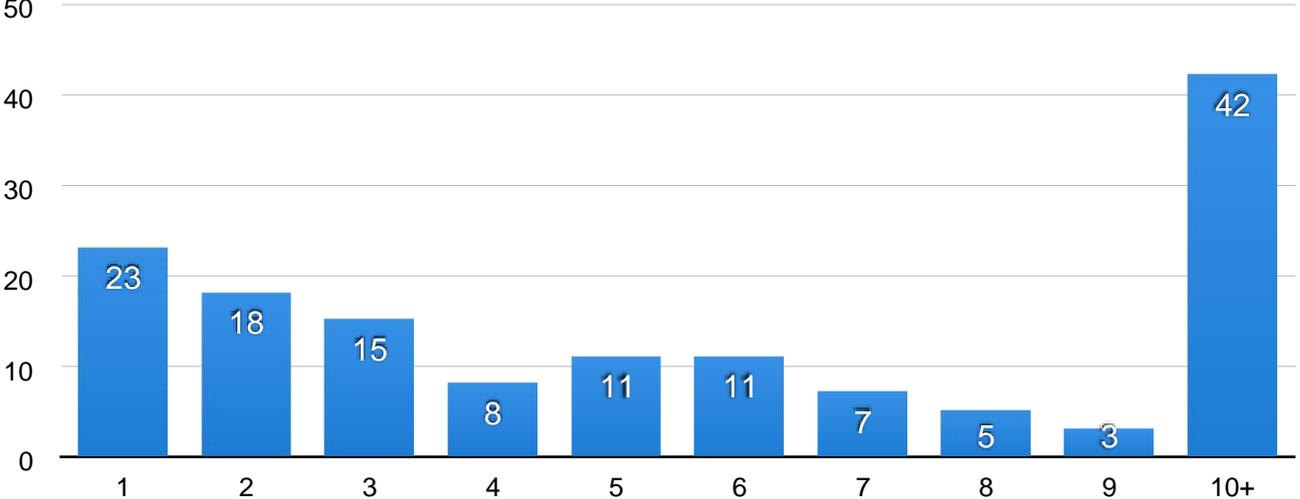
Q2: Gender



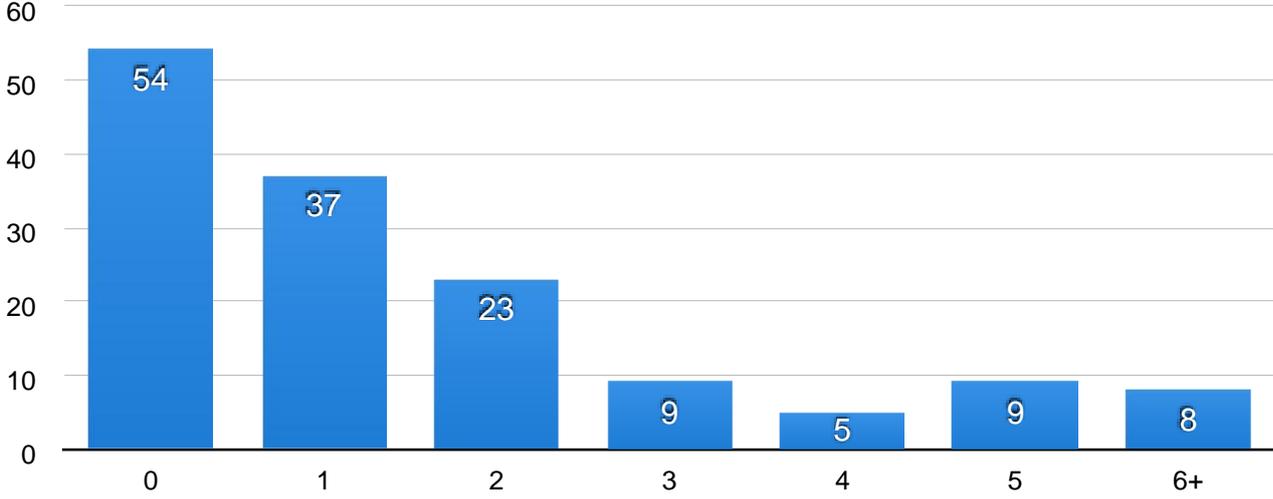
Q3: Lay or Ordained?



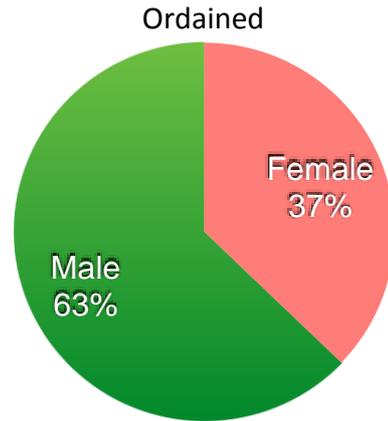
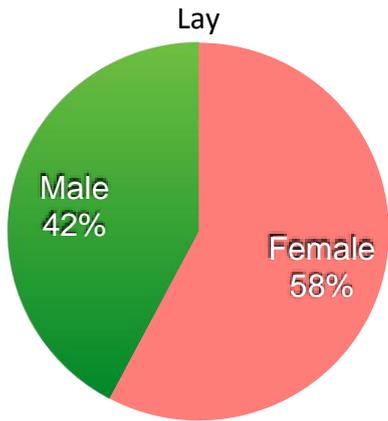
Q4: How many times have you attended the Conference?



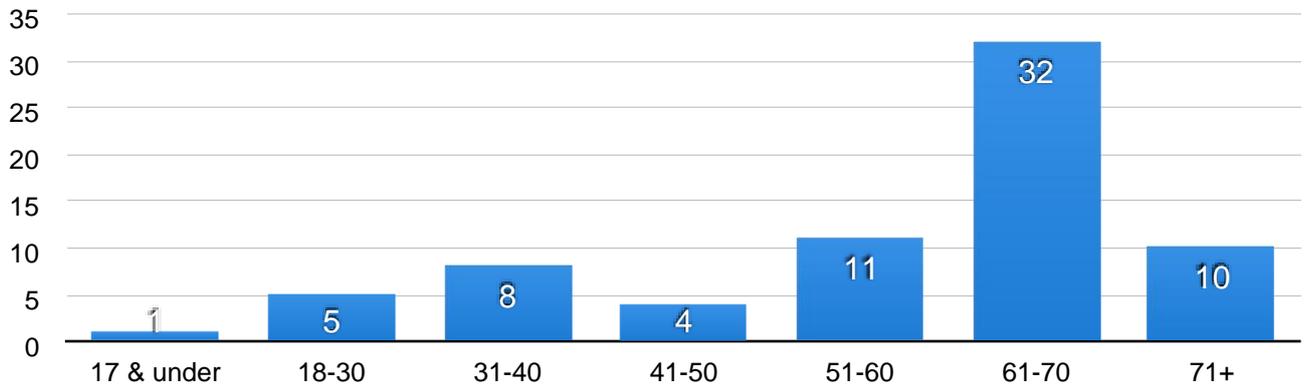
Q5: How many times did you speak during full Conference sessions?



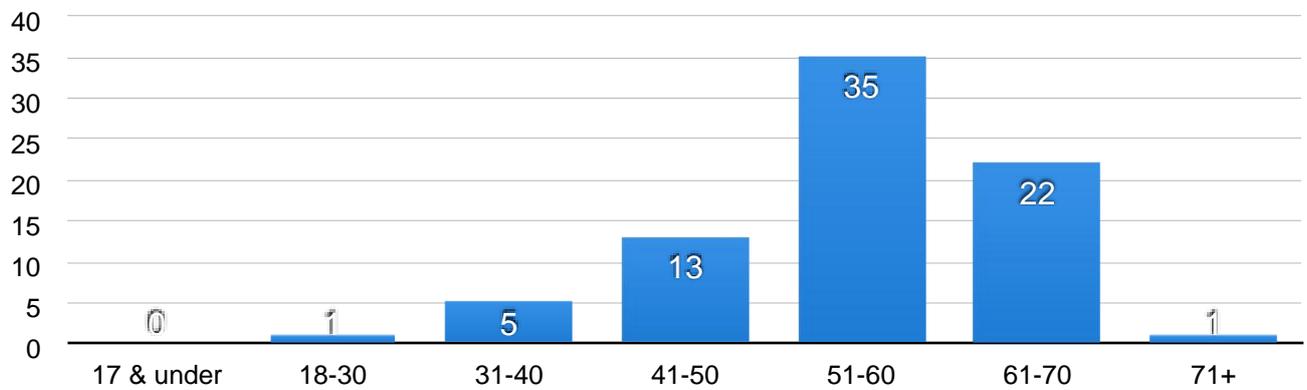
Age & Gender balance of Lay and Ordained



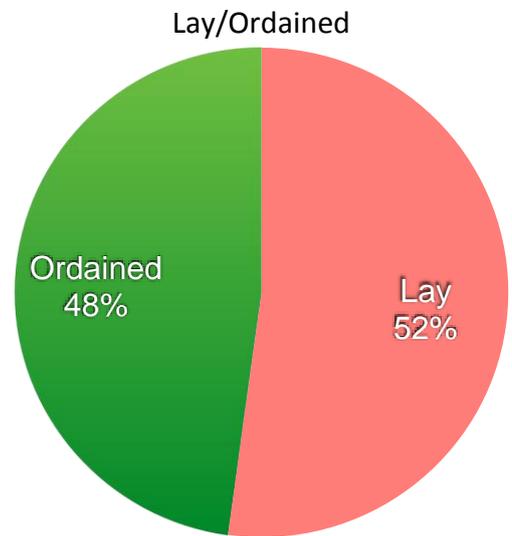
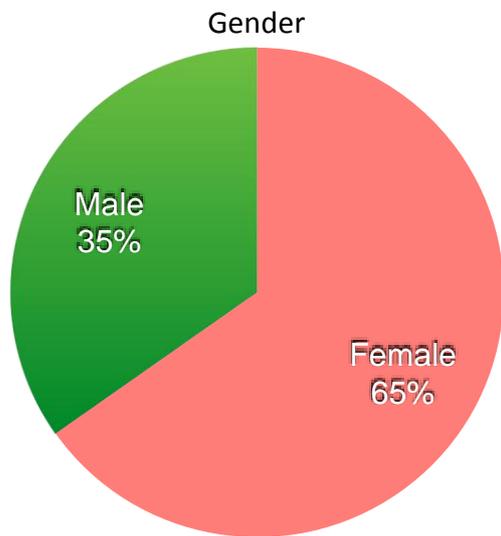
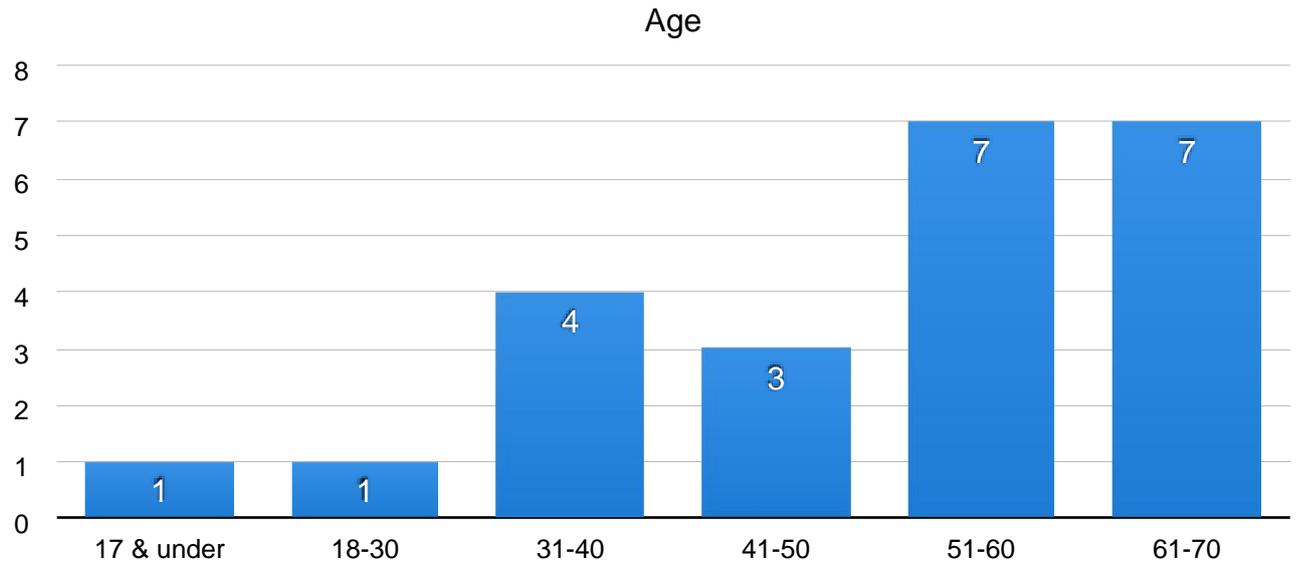
Lay



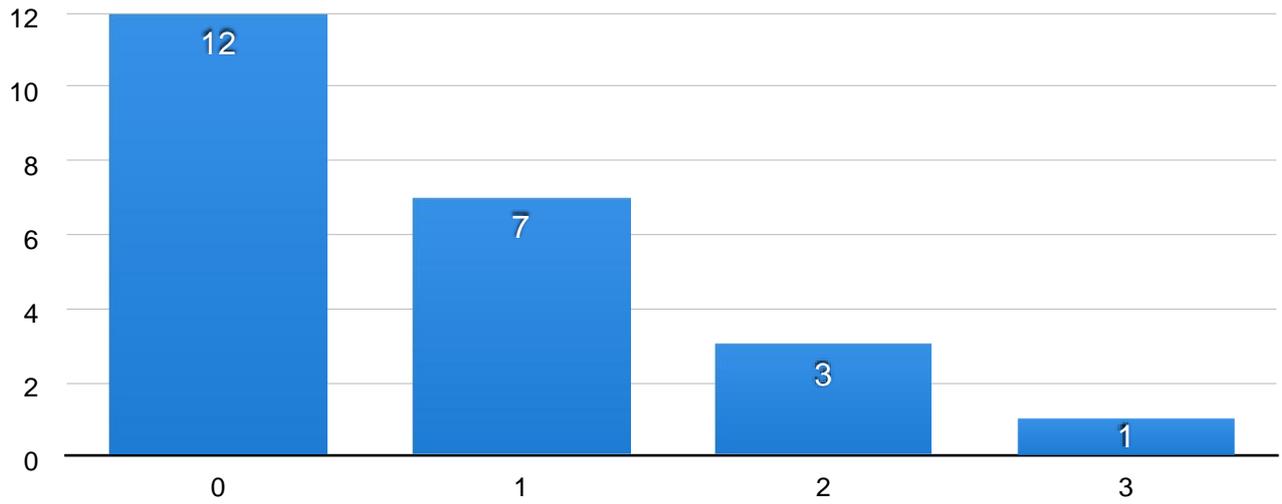
Ordained



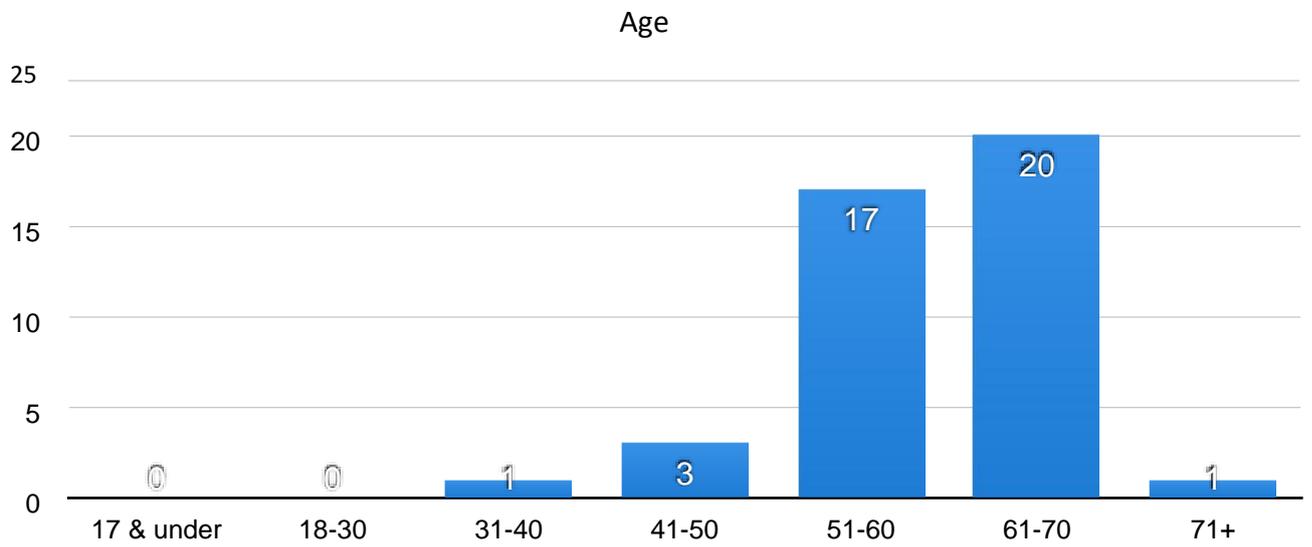
First time attendees



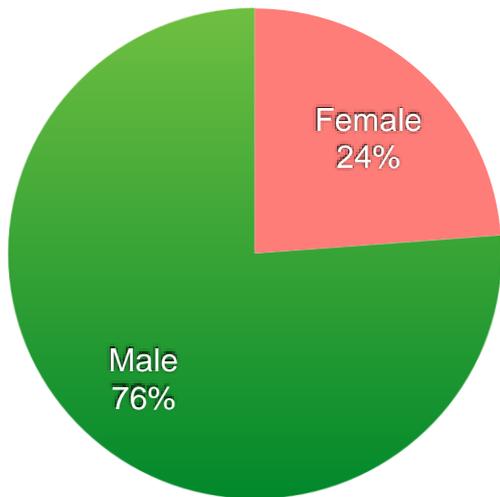
Number of Speeches



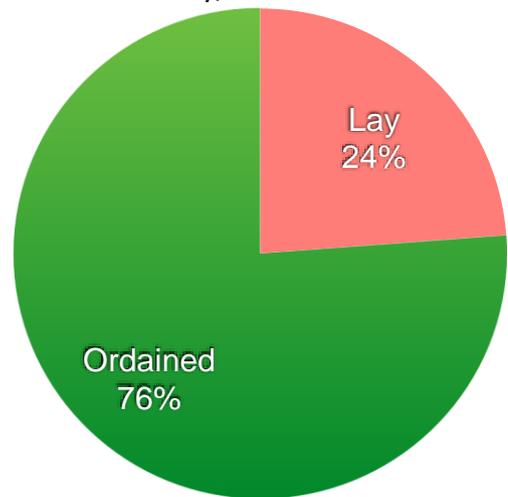
Those who have attended 10+ times



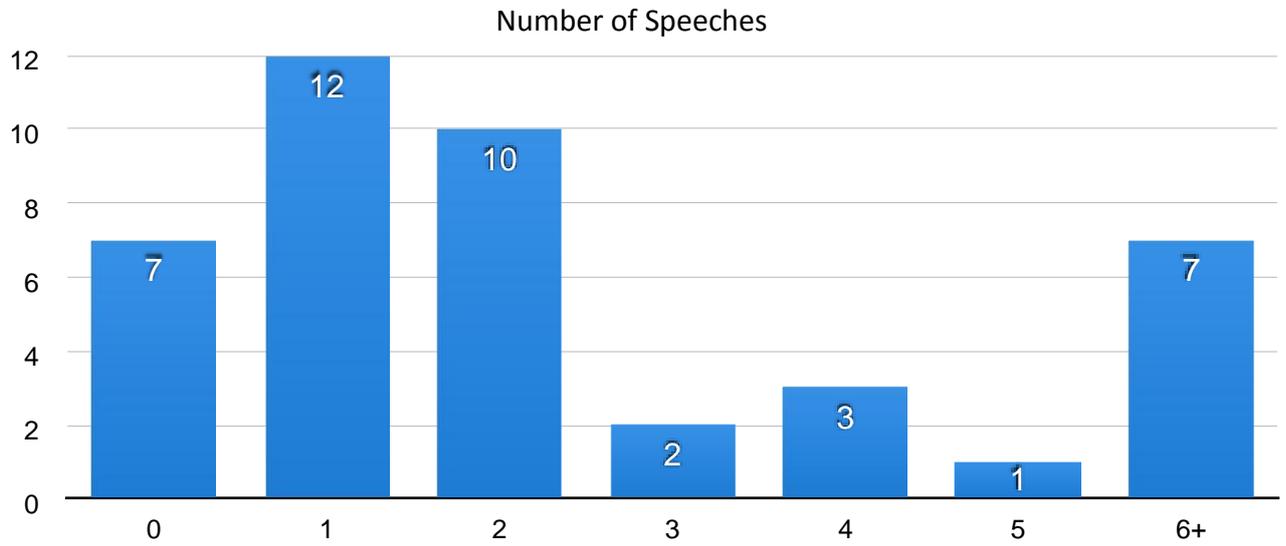
Gender



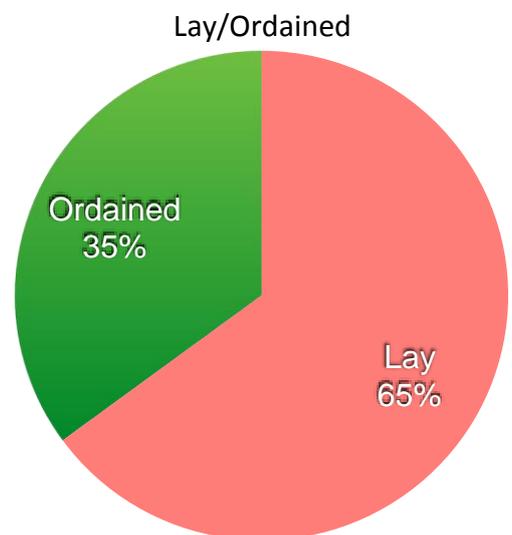
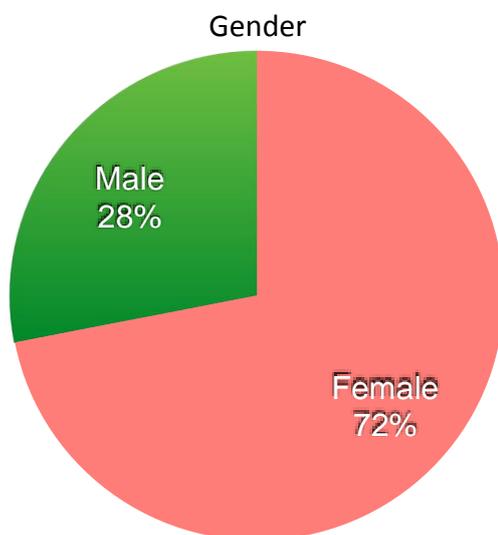
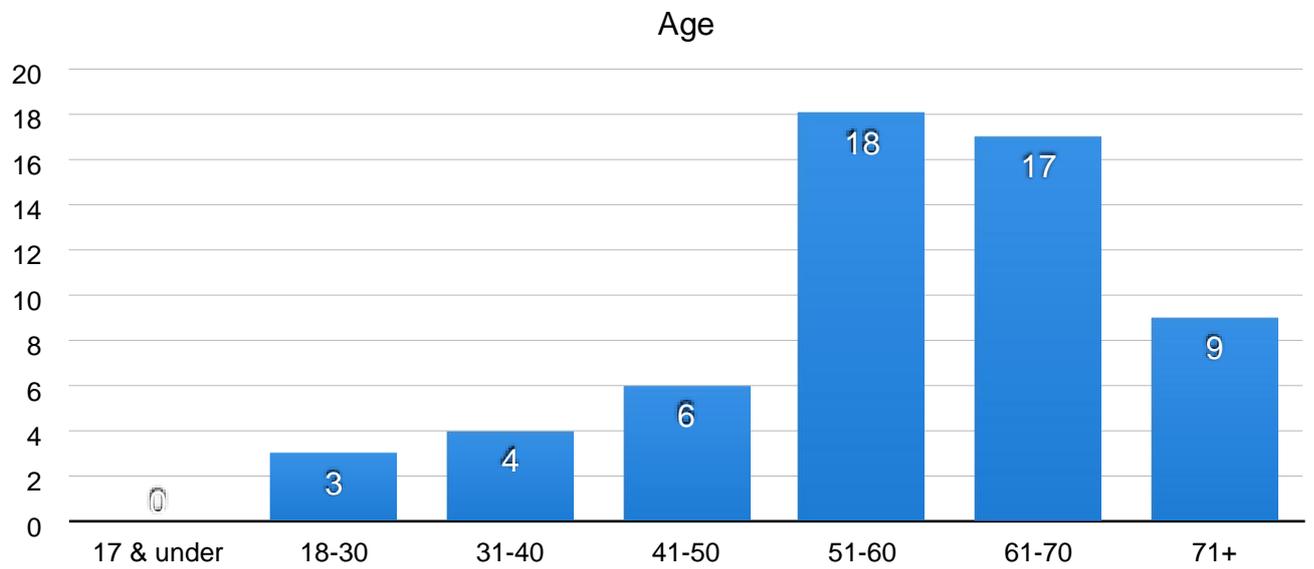
Lay/Ordained



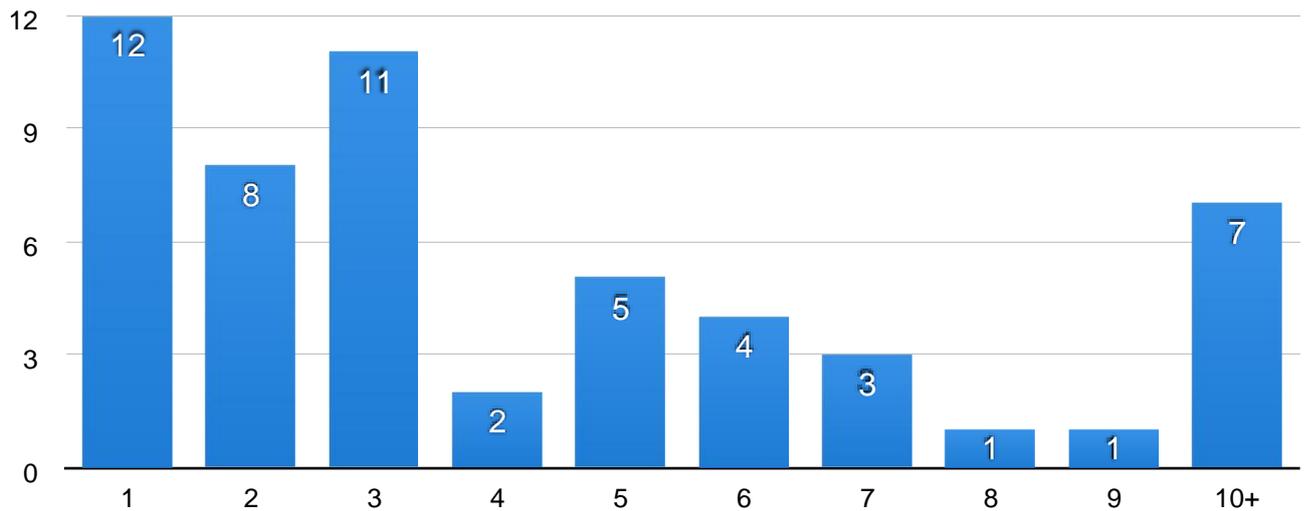
(NB all the ordained members of this category are not all male and vice versa, the distribution of male/female is across both the lay and ordained in this category)



Those who did not speak



Number of times attended



Comments

Firstly, it should be noted that some of the figures will not quite add up to the total number of respondents as some chose to skip particular questions.

Both the age and frequency of attendance show predictable results, and the balance between genders and lay/ordained is encouragingly equal. Interesting that these results show 61.5% of Conference members made a speech at some point (this is not something that personally I would have predicted), although it is likely that the more 'active' members of the Conference would be more likely to engage in such a survey.

Age distribution of the first-time attendees is largely in keeping with the overall demographic in terms of age and lay/ordained, however a greater proportion of females attended for the first time. As expected half of the first timers did not speak and no one spoke more than three times.

Longer term attendees again at older end, as expected, but should be noted that a significantly higher proportion are male and/or ordained. The vast majority of this category contributed in terms of speeches but only 17% 6 or more times.

By contrast, those who did not speak were largely female and/or lay and were more infrequent Conference attendees.

Question 6 and 7

A number of points came out of the respondents' answers to the open questions about how they could be better enabled to participate and engage in the Methodist Conference and how support could be improved at a District level; these have been grouped into themes which are summarised below and then listed in their entirety.

There were a number of comments which suggested that the way the Conference operates and manages debate and conferring is '**fine as is**' or '**impossible to change.**' However these are outweighed by those who feel that change is needed, and provide suggestions and potential solutions for how that change can happen.

Through a number of responses, the need for the **earlier production of reports** was highlighted as essential; this allows reps to spend more time researching the issues mentioned and discuss with local church and circuit as well as fellow reps how those issues might impact the local church.

Preparation at a district level was identified as an important feature of engagement with the Conference. In a number of districts this is already happening through a **preparatory meeting**, and similarly the districts also **meet post Conference** to discuss how the decisions made by the Conference will impact their local churches and circuits, and how the reps will feed through those changes.

In a number of cases these meetings focus on enabling people to understand Conference **procedure**, and talking through **practicalities**; some have suggested that there needs to be **greater emphasis on theological reflection** on reports instead.

In all cases, these meetings involved **general discussion around reports** including the following points:

- clearing up **questions**
- **helping each other to understand issues**
- identifying issues which will be **controversial or generate significant discussion** - identifying what might be of **particular interest for the individual district**.

Others saw it as a significant opportunity to **build relationships with other reps**, as these meetings also included a social element. These are also helpful in **dividing up reports between the reps** to ease the amount of reading each person has to do.

Although the comments on district preparation were largely positive, some identified **geographic difficulties** as one possible barrier in some of the larger districts; one respondent had used **Google Hangout** which could be a solution to this. It was also emphasised that this kind of meeting would need to be **well facilitated**, taking into account **different circumstances** (for example those who work full-time and are already taking holiday for the Conference itself) and those within the District who should be included but have **Conference roles other than district reps** (for example youth reps, Conference officers, concern for racial justice reps, etc).

In terms of managing Conference debates; **small groups** as a method of engaging with reports was mentioned throughout the responses, both formal and informal. This would allow for wider engagement and participation, particularly with those who have **difficulty with public speaking**. A number also identified the **better presentation of reports** as a possible solution; either clearer written reports, more visual presentations to Conference, or some people questioned whether written reports were always the best method.

In addition, respondents wanted more **opportunity to discuss with other Conference representatives**; either through **facilitated discussion** or some kind of **online forum** to run both before and after the Conference.

Finally, the need for an **Introduction to the Conference session** was identified by a significant number; either this could be online in the form of a webinar or video, or a session before the start of the Conference.

Full List of Responses

Q6 - Do you have any thoughts on how you could be helped to better engage and participate in the Methodist Conference?

A. Through support leading up to the Conference

- Earlier production of reports (16)
- Prior activity in the district - meeting/preparation/support for reps (12)

- Introduction video/online guide for new members (8)
- Summary info on reports (7)
- Induction session at Conference (5)
- Support in understanding the reports (5)
- Fine as is (5)
- Signposting to key issues (4)
- More opportunity for interaction with other Conference reps (3)
- Connexional support (2)
- Be more connected to the wider church

B. Through more creative conferring

General positive comments (4)

Fine as is (4)

- "youth reps an example of this"

Impossible to achieve (2)

Shorter speeches and therefore more people able to speak (2)

Procedure can be a block to fruitful discussion

Alternative debate methods:

- Small groups
 - Encourage use (18)
 - Discourage use (2)
- Workshops
 - Encourage use (4)
 - Discourage use in the 2014 style (3)
 - Encourages those who would not normally speak to input into debates (4)
- Interactive Q&A (3)
- Parallel sessions
- Hearings unhelpful

C. Through different methods of engaging with reports

Small groups - as long as well facilitated (12)

Executive summaries - including background to reports (7)

Better presentation of reports (6) - more clarity

- more creative and engaging

- does it have to be through written report?

Spend more time on fewer issues - decide priorities beforehand (3)

More work in District

D. Through interaction with other Conference members

Yes! (12)

Small groups (6)

Mix up districts/groups (5)

Prioritise district meeting (5)

How to engage all in this, not just the regulars? (4)

Facilitated interaction (4)

Unnecessary - already happens (3)

No time for it

Online forum

E. Other

Make effort to help people feel at ease (4)

- Use experienced people
- Awareness of people struggling to 'keep up'

More inspiration, less governance (3)

Need more variety of voices (2)

Coping with reading (2)

Prioritise the Conference's role to confer

Better presentation of information

District role is key

Need for 'full discussions'

Do we need this every year?

Q7 - District Gatherings

Districts mentioned as already doing this:

- Cumbria
- Darlington
- Leeds
- London
- Scotland
- Shetland
- Wales
- Wolverhampton & Shrewsbury
- York & Hull

What happens at these meetings?

- Explain and help understand procedure and practicalities, particularly for first timers (21)
- Guidance towards key issues (16)
- General discussion of reports, clearing up questions/lack of understanding (15)
- Chance to build relationships with other reps from districts (12)
- Individuals given responsibility for different reports, either to speak on them or to take notes to then report back to synods (7)
- Explore reports of particular interest to the District (5)

Issues with District gatherings:

- Need more time between publishing reports and the Conference to help this improve (9)
- Geographic issues (7)
- Needs to be focused on theological reflection rather than practicalities (4)
- Needs to take into account full-time workers - people already taking days of holiday for the Conference (2)
- Important to have honest and open discussion - not steered or controlled by District Chair (1)
- Needs to be well facilitated - aware of how different people engage in different ways (1)
- Need to ensure people with other Conference roles from the district are included (1)
- A lot to discuss for one meeting (1)

Innovative approaches:

- Google hangout (1)