

Report of the Task Group for Regional and District Structure Planning

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This report updates the Council of the work of the Task Group for Regional and District Structure Planning which was appointed by the Council following the direction of the Conference to bring proposals on the reconfiguration of Districts (resolution 30/11). The group has received reports from the conversations which have taken place (mainly within the stationing regions) on new ways of working together. These conversations (as the Council has been made aware) have proceeded in different ways and at different pace in different regions.

Nevertheless, the Task Group believes that discussions have revealed a number of common concerns and some areas of agreement, even though the responses of regional groupings to 'Reaffirming Our Calling' have differed. Broadly speaking, there is recognition that:

1. The role of a Chair as mission leader and 'pastor pastorum' is valued and whatever structure replaces the current configuration of districts needs to honour that.
2. The need to reduce the MCF funding of Chairs' appointments cannot be met by undermining that essential ministry.
3. The variety of models of assistant and deputy Chairs suggest that that ministry can be exercised by others on behalf of the Chair but not by reducing the Chairs' ministry to a largely administrative function.
4. There is a willingness in many parts of the Connexion to separate the missional/pastoral role of the Chair from the representative and connexional leadership responsibilities (eg, 'Regional District Chair' model in NW, willingness to alternate representation in NE, Chair of more than one district in E Mids).
5. In some places Districts are already combining their functions because of a lack of resources and/or business (eg, Candidates Committees, Probationers' Committees).
6. The appointment of interim chairs has been costly and needs to give way to a more stable, permanent model.
7. In many places, Districts are deemed to have coherence and there is hesitancy about moving boundaries.
8. Districts which are not in England have their own particularity that needs to be honoured.

In sum, we have moved towards a place where it is commonly envisaged that a smaller number of Connexional Leaders (ie, members of the Conference and the Connexional Leaders' Forum) who are Chairs might fruitfully share and coordinate the work of ordained and lay leaders within a region (some of whom would be District Chairs). However, a similar pattern of both District and connexional leadership could be achieved by enlarging the Districts and freeing as far as possible each new District to organise its internal life in a way that met its regional needs and made good use of its resources; each of those enlarged Districts would be able to retain or not the existing District boundaries under a different nomenclature if it chose and to reconfigure all or some existing Chairs' posts into Assistant or Deputy Chair roles.

One advantage of this would be that no change to the Deed of Union would be required to reduce the number of Chairs involved in connexional governance bodies (eg, the Deed of Union provides for the Chair of each Home District to be a member of the Conference). The danger is the creation of another level of governance (between the District and the Circuit); however, there are already groups of circuits within some districts that exist for purposes of mutual encouragement and there would be no need for any meeting or body within such groups to hold trustee responsibility nor for there to be Standing Orders that relate to them.

The Task Group believes that this may be the way towards the lighter and more affordable structure at which 'Reaffirming Our Calling' aims. There is a considerable amount of work needing to be done before a proposal can be taken to the Conference along these lines. Some of the issues already noted are:

Finance: the reduction of the number of Chairs suggested here is a clear saving to the Central Services Budget but detailed consideration needs to be given as to how Districts are enabled to provide for other posts and services that would need to exist alongside the Chairs.

Maintaining, and developing, the sense of Connexion: the danger of larger districts is that local churches could feel disconnected from the MCB as a whole. Further exploration of these proposals will need to include reflection on the communications and leadership in the Connexion and in each District that reinforce connexionalism. One possibility that could be explored if the Council agree is to align connexional structures (Stationing, Learning and Development, Safeguarding, &c) with the new structure; again there would need to be careful thought about the maintenance of the 'bigger picture' beyond each District.

Practical arrangements within the new larger Districts: there will be some practical challenges to be negotiated in the creation of each new District. Cultural differences within existing neighbouring Districts can be very significant and detailed thought needs to be given to the pooling of resources. The timetable for change would need to ensure (as SO 401(2) requires) careful consultation with the Circuits and Districts affected.

Missional emphasis: the proposals need to ensure that resources that are released are used for mission, that new structures enable effective investment under 'God for All', and that the process is undergirded by prayer.

Timetable: the Conference would need to agree a date by which the new structure is complete. Work would need to be done on how those regions that have moved at different paces are able to meet the timetable.

Map: By and large, conversations have taken place within stationing regions. However, a new district configuration might need to take account of factors which could lead to mergers with other neighbours or the redrawing of boundaries.

Standing Orders: whilst no change might be necessary to the Deed of Union, there would need to be consideration as to whether changes to SOs are needed to enable a variety in internal organisation and roles to support the Chair and share the leadership of the District.

The Task Group therefore asks the Council to indicate whether or not it is in favour of future work being done to reconfigure the existing Districts into larger Districts that approximately correspond to current regional groupings. The group anticipates that this would result in 12 to 14 Districts (including two (or three) island Districts, a single Synod in Wales/Cymru and one or two in Scotland and Shetland).

*****RESOLUTIONS**

24A/1. The Council receives the report

24A/2. The Council directs the Task Group to begin detailed work as outlined in the report to reduce the number of Districts.