

Review of the Size of the Conference

Contact name and details	Mr Dudley Coates coatesdudley@gmail.com 01747 229168
Working Party Members	Mr Dudley Coates (Chair) The Revd Michaela Youngson (Convenor) The Revd Rosemarie Clarke Mr Martin Harker The Revd Stephen Lindridge
Resolutions	<p>38/1. The Council receives the report.</p> <p>38/2. The Council recommends that, in the light of the work currently being done on Oversight and Trusteeship, no change to the size of the Conference be made until the implications of that wider work for the role of the Conference are clearer.</p> <p>38/3. The Council recommends those working on Oversight and Trusteeship to bear in mind both the principles described in this report and the ideas as to how Conference members might, in the future, most effectively participate in the governance of the Church and the furtherance of its mission.</p> <p>38/4. The Council recommends that the issues raised in Annex B to this report should be taken into account at an early stage of any further work on the size of the Conference, either by those working on Oversight and Trusteeship, or by a future working group convened for that purpose.</p>

INTRODUCTION

1. When the Conference of the reunited Methodist Church first met in 1933 it had 900 members. Since then, the Conference has periodically reconsidered its membership in terms of overall size and of how the available seats should be filled. In 2007, the Conference adopted Standing Order 100(2), which requires that “the Conference shall from time to time, and not less than once in every five years” review the size of the membership of the Conference.
2. The 2020 Conference, by resolution 25/3, directed the Secretary of the Conference to convene such a review, to report to the 2021 Conference. The working party was appointed by the Methodist Council in October 2020 (MC/20/102, resolution 102/2), requiring the working party to report to the Council in March 2021.
3. The Conference last voted to change its size in 2007, when it decided to reduce the number of full voting members from 384 to 306 by 2010. In 2013, a further review was conducted, which concluded that it was too soon to make any further change to the size of the Conference, with which the Conference concurred. No further review has reported to the Conference since 2013, and so the current review is overdue.
4. The Working Party has met online on three occasions and has reviewed previous reports regarding the purpose, nature and size of the Conference. It has considered matters of leadership, representation and participation, issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, and the current work on Oversight and Trusteeship within the Methodist Church. The review of previous reports has

helped the working party to identify principles that need to be considered when making decisions about the size of the Conference and these principles are laid out below.

PRINCIPLES & CONSIDERATIONS

The Purpose of the Conference

5. The Conference of 2006 adopted the statement of the purpose of the Conference set out in Annex A to this paper. That statement includes its own summary:

The primary purpose of the Conference is to engage in Christian Conferring in order to discern the will of God and then to formulate and oversee ways in which the whole Connexion can respond to that will.

The current constitution of the Conference

6. The current number of full voting members (306) of the Conference is determined in SO 100; Clause 14 of the Deed of Union specifies that at least half of the 306 must be lay persons and SO 100 specifies that at least 14 of the 306 must be Deacons (including the Warden). The composition of the Conference is further specified as follows:
 - 1) ex-officio members specifically named in clause 14 of the Deed of Union (the three-year Presidency, the Secretary, the Chairs of District, the Warden of the MDO, the President and Secretary of the Irish Conference, two other persons appointed by each of the Irish Conference and the General Conference of the UMC, and two persons chosen from among the associate members appointed by other Churches);
 - 2) Conference-elected representatives (the number of them is set in SO 101 as nine);
 - 3) representatives of a Methodist Youth Assembly (under SOs 102 and 250 these are currently the Youth President and three others by elected by the Assembly)
 - 4) ex-officio members specified in SO 101 (the Assistant Secretary of the Conference, the Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice, the Record Secretary, the Journal Secretary, the Convener of the Memorials Committee, and the Chair of the Business Committee);
 - 5) ex-officio members specified in SO 102 (the Chairs of the Methodist Council and the SRC, the lead Connexional Treasurer, the Connexional Secretaries (currently one), a commissioned forces chaplain, two persons serving overseas, six persons representing EDI interests and one representative of the Faith and Order Committee, of the Law and Polity Committee, of the Stationing Committee and of Methodist Women in Britain respectively);
 - 6) persons elected by the Synods (making up the remainder of the 306) – currently around 224 (73%).

Alteration to the list above or abolition of the categories of Conference-elected or Youth Assembly representatives would require amendments to the Deed of Union and would be subject to the deferred special resolution process taking two years (three Conferences).

7. SO 105 further specifies that District seats are to be allocated in proportion to the membership in each District except that:
 - each District in England and Wales is entitled to a minimum of four representatives;
 - two island Districts (Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) are each entitled to two representatives; and
 - Scotland and Shetland share an allocation of six representatives.

At present, three Districts (Cymru, Bolton and Rochdale, and Cumbria) have only the minimum of four elected members whilst the largest District (London) elects twenty representatives.

8. In addition to the full members, there are currently six ecumenical associate members and eighteen associate members representing partner churches overseas.

Considerations relating to the size of the Conference

9. It seems clear that the size of the Conference should be sufficient to fulfil its responsibilities as a place of conferring, of oversight and as a governing body. How representative does the Conference need to be to exercise its role of 'adopting formal policies and legislation' (paragraph 4 of Annex A)? For example, would it be sufficient for the elected members of the Conference to be one presbyter and one lay person from each District (plus an appropriate number of deacons)? If so, the present requirements of the Deed of Union would require membership of the Conference to be somewhere between 160 and 180. Given the policies of the church on equality, diversity and inclusion and the need for the Districts to be, and to feel to be, properly represented the question remains as to what an appropriate number of representatives might be.
10. Currently ex officio members hold 27% of the seats in the Conference. Because more ex-officio seats are held by presbyters than by lay people, and because the Chairs of District must be presbyters, just over 60% of the presbyters in the Conference are elected by the District Synods whereas over 80% of both deacons and lay members are Synod-elected. If there is a wish to reduce the size of the Conference, there is a significant challenge around managing the balances between ministers and lay people and between ex-officio and elected members. It seems clear that the smaller the Conference becomes, the more difficult it is to ensure that the Districts make up a reasonable part of the voting membership of the Conference.
11. What number below the present membership of 306 is the 'right' size of Conference, and what should be the criteria for making that decision? To what degree would the Conference be less representative if the largest Districts had only the same number of representatives as the smallest? It is believed that the original intention at Methodist Union in 1932 was that there should be around one member of the Conference for 1000 members of the Church (although this has rarely been achieved in practice). That approach would give a Conference of around 170 members at present. On that model most Districts could probably have three (one presbyter and two lay) elected representatives (plus the Chair) with perhaps ten seats at most being distributed on the basis of membership in the Districts.
12. Ensuring that the Conference appropriately reflects the Church's policies on equality, diversity and inclusion is another challenge. Standing Order 417(2) requires members of District Synods, when electing representatives to the Conference, to 'have regard for the composition of the membership of the District as a whole with regard to age, sex and ethnic origin.' In most Districts this SO is read or printed, but unless the list of those standing for election is genuinely diverse, it may have little practical impact. Further steps are needed to enable Districts to ensure that the representatives they elect are diverse. The inclusion of representatives of the Youth Assembly (3Generate) and of people representing equality, diversity and inclusion interests helps, but diversity amongst District elected representatives is, from observation, somewhat patchy. The smaller the Conference becomes, and consequently the smaller the number elected by each Synod, the more challenging it will be for Districts to achieve the objective set in SO 417(2).
13. It should be noted that the discussion above does not cover associate (non-voting) members of the Conference. There are currently six ecumenical associate members and the working party sees no reason to change that at present. There are also eighteen non-voting representatives of partner Churches in other countries. In 2019 the Conference decided not to change the nature, nor number of representatives from the Global Church. A conversation about this was held with the Revd Conrad Hicks, Director of Global Relationships. The Global Relationships Committee is at present setting up an in-depth review with global partners regarding the nature of our relationship with them and this Working Party believes it would be better for any recommendation of a change to the number of representatives to be made following that process and taking into consideration the outcomes of the Oversight and Trusteeship review. Consequently, we make no recommendation for change in the numbers of associate members.

14. The working party was not explicitly asked to consider the financial implications of the size of the Conference, but we are aware that this is of interest and concern not just to members of the Conference but to the Church membership as a whole. Any reduction in the number of members of the Conference will, of course, lead to a reduction in the overall cost of the annual meeting of the Conference, through the direct costs of accommodation, food, travel and paperwork for each member. However, we also note that the smaller the Conference membership becomes, the larger the fixed costs of the venue and support costs become as a proportion of total costs, while the cost of Conference members would become a relatively smaller proportion. If the same venue were to be used for the celebration events of the Conference weekend and for the business sessions of the Conference, then it is unlikely the Conference will be able to move to smaller venues, although it is possible that the use of different venues for weekdays and the weekend could be explored. A reduction in the length of the Conference by a day could lead to a similar or larger reduction in the cost of the Conference compared to a large reduction in the size of its membership.

Oversight and Trusteeship

15. Having noted the considerations above, the working party is aware that this work is being conducted alongside the ongoing work on *Oversight and Trusteeship* (Conference 2020, report 25). We are grateful to have been given sight of paper MC/21/7A to the January meeting of the Council which has enabled us to consider the relationship between the two processes. The key proposals in *Oversight and Trusteeship* are that a new Executive Council (EC) would replace the current Methodist Council and the Strategy and Resources Committee, and that there would be a reconfiguration of responsibilities, with some tasks currently conducted by the Conference in future being managed by the EC.
16. The proposed changes could mean a change in both the volume and the nature of the work that the Conference would be conducting in future. These changes will have implications for the appropriate size and constitution of the Conference. However, at the current time, the *Oversight and Trusteeship* proposals have not reached the level of detail where it is clear exactly which tasks and responsibilities would be conducted by the Conference and which by the EC or its subcommittees in future. Therefore, it is too early to draw firm conclusions, but we can offer suggestions as to a range of possible effects upon the Conference that need to be considered.
17. If a significant number of tasks were to be transferred from the Conference's workload to that of the EC, the Conference might have a smaller workload. It might require less time to conduct its business, and it may also be argued that it also would need fewer members to conduct this business. Alternatively, it could be argued that, while less time might be needed, the same range and number of members would be needed to allow for proper debate. It may also be the case that many of the matters that might move from being the responsibility of the Conference to the EC are those matters currently dealt with very briefly as essentially a rubber-stamp, including in *en bloc* business, and so the reallocation may in fact not make a significant difference to the Conference's workload.
18. Another view could be that with some of the more administrative matters transferred to the EC, the Conference would have more time, energy and focus to devote to conferring on matters of principle, and to setting the vision which the EC would then seek to implement. This may require, or benefit from, longer and deeper consideration of the issues which come before the Conference. This may require as much time as present, and at least as wide a variety of perspectives. Indeed, the working party is minded to suggest that more effort should be made to shape the processes of conferring in the Conference so that a larger number and wider range of members of the Conference are able to contribute to debates.

19. The size and composition of the EC is another consideration relevant to the size and composition of the Conference. The EC would be a smaller body than the Methodist Council, and not be representative of the Districts in the way that the Council currently is. As the representation of Districts (as well as of the Youth Assembly and EDI concerns) would be removed at the level of the Council, there is an argument that such representation would need to be maintained (or increased) through the Conference. As the EC would be accountable to the Conference, the Conference would need to retain the capacity to hold it to account, which would require sufficient expertise and time to keep up with the work done by the EC.
20. There is also a question regarding the nature of the work the EC and its subcommittees could undertake, compared to the current Council. It is argued that a smaller core group, meeting more frequently will allow more efficient decision-making. This might enable the EC to conduct a high volume of administrative and management work swiftly and effectively. However, the Council currently also has a consultative role in discussing significant pieces of work, particularly before they are considered by the Conference. This is made possible by its representative nature. Without the Council, there could be a need for additional processes to be used to ensure such scrutiny of work by representative groups. This could, for example, be taken on by subgroups of the Conference, perhaps working remotely during the year as suggested in paragraph 26 below.
21. There is also uncertainty at present about the authority that the EC would have to make decisions during the year, where this goes beyond its core role of implementing the decisions of the Conference. Currently, where an urgent decision is needed before the next Conference, in most cases the Council is empowered to take this on the delegated authority of the Conference. The confidence of the Conference in the Council to take such decisions derives in part from its size and its representative nature. It is not clear whether it would be appropriate for the EC to take all such decisions on the Conference's behalf between annual Conferences. It may be appropriate for the Conference to convene (remotely) for one or more brief meetings during the year to provide guidance on matters of principle and to give direction to the EC.
22. The January report of the *Oversight and Trusteeship* process proposed (MC/21/7A, 8.2 j) that all members of the EC should be members of the Conference. This would lead to an increase in the ex-officio members of Conference of between nine and sixteen, after taking into account the current roles that would be replaced by the new system. It might be possible to make reductions in some other categories of current ex-officio members, but it would be very challenging to end up with a total number of ex-officio members lower than the current total, without significant changes to the principles of which roles require ex-officio seats. In turn, if the total size of the Conference were also to be reduced, this would lead to District representatives making up a smaller proportion, and ex-officio members a larger proportion compared to the current composition.
23. We suggest that the question of whether all members of the EC should automatically be members of the Conference needs careful consideration. A case can clearly be made that it would be appropriate for all trustees to have a role in the Conference. However, this block would make up a significant proportion of the members of Conference, and will require reductions in the number of District-elected representatives to accommodate it. There is also arguably a tension between the role of the EC being to receive and implement instructions sent by the Conference, and all its members also being members of the Conference and involved in shaping those decisions.
24. In summary, the evolving proposals of the *Oversight and Trusteeship* process raise significant questions of the future role and ways of working of the Conference. We welcome and encourage debate on these questions alongside discussion of the EC and other new bodies that are proposed. We think that it is neither possible nor wise to make decisions on the size and composition of the Conference until the Conference has expressed its mind on the *Oversight and Trusteeship* proposals, and until the future role and responsibilities of the Conference in any new system is clearer. This does not necessarily mean that the size of the Conference cannot be reconsidered

until the *Oversight and Trusteeship* process is completed, as this may take several years, and the proposals themselves, if accepted, would at the least require some changes to the *ex-officio* membership of the Conference. However, it would mean waiting until the Conference has taken major decisions of principle, such as whether an EC will be created, and the types of matters which would in future be considered by the Conference.

Possible future ways of working

25. The Working Party believes that being a member of the Conference might be recognised as a year-round responsibility, whereby members of the Conference may be called upon to confer about or scrutinise work between Conferences – either as a whole body, or in sub-groups. This would allow a level of scrutiny and consultation by a representative group which may be lost without the Methodist Council. When registering as representatives, members might express areas of interest in the life of the Church in which they would wish to make a contribution and be allocated to sub-groups using that information. Using technology such as Zoom would allow for broad participation. Because there would be no travelling these events could be done at a suitable time to allow as many as possible to attend and spread over several weeks to allow each to have a focus, rather than feel like one was rushing from one subject to another.

CONCLUSIONS

26. It may be that the Council will conclude that this report is sufficient and that no further action is needed on the size of Conference until the next five-yearly review is due. By that time the outcome of the current work on oversight and trusteeship should be clearer. If the Council judges that no further work needs to be done until the next five year review, it might simply decline resolution 3. But, if the Council wishes further work to be done on this issue before then - whether through the Oversight and Trusteeship Working Party or by future specific group, resolution 3 is one possible way forward.
27. Noting that changes in the Deed of Union take longer to achieve, when further work is to be done, the working party recommends that the issues raised in Annex B to this report should be considered, preferably by the Council as guidance to those undertaking such further work.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 38/1. The Council receives the report.**
- 38/2. The Council recommends that, in the light of the work currently being done on Oversight and Trusteeship, no change to the size of the Conference be made until the implications of that wider work for the role of the Conference are clearer.**
- 38/3. The Council recommends those working on Oversight and Trusteeship to bear in mind both the principles described in this report and the ideas as to how Conference members might, in the future, most effectively participate in the governance of the Church and the furtherance of its mission.**
- 38/4. The Council recommends that the issues raised in Annex B to this report should be taken into account at an early stage of any further work on the size of the Conference, either by those working on Oversight and Trusteeship, or by a future working group convened for that purpose.**

ANNEX A

The Purpose of the Methodist Conference (as adopted by the Conference of 2006)

1. Methodism began as a movement of people connected with John Wesley (“the Connexion”) which was structured for mission and discipleship, and which eventually became a Church. The origins of the Methodist Conference lie in a series of meetings which John Wesley held with his Preachers, Helpers and Assistants as the movement developed. In these meetings they sought to discern the movements of the Spirit and the promptings of grace, and to shape and regulate ways of responding to them in worship and mission. The means of doing this was through a process of “Christian Conferring” which Wesley also saw operating when people gathered together in a Class Meeting or Band to help each other in their Christian experience and to support each other in their discipleship; and when the Travelling Preachers visited and met with the Class Leaders to oversee and support them in their task. In the Class Meeting and Band the basic questions for this Christian Conferring can be expressed in modern terms as “Where is God in our experience? What is God doing? What is God calling or prompting us to do?”. In the first Conference which Wesley held with the Preachers in 1744 this type of question was applied to the task of the Preachers and so took the form “What to teach? How to teach? What to do?”, or, in other words, the content, methodology and strategic organisation of mission.
2. As a result, the Conference primarily exists to exercise *oversight* in the broadest sense of the term. It seeks to focus, renew and nurture the whole connexion’s worship of God and participation in God’s mission. In doing so it seeks to ensure that the whole Connexion remains true to its calling and to its experience and place in an apostolic succession of faithful response and witness to the Gospel. In this its teaching role is still of paramount importance, both in formulating what is to be taught and ensuring that it is shared with all the Methodist people. The Conference therefore stands at the heart of the Connexion, connecting it with its past and its future, linking it with external bodies and joining together its constituent parts.
3. As noted above, one way in which the Conference exercises that general oversight is in formulating and overseeing strategies for responding to God’s will throughout the whole Connexion. In doing this, the Conference is being the governing body of the Methodist Church under God. This is the role ascribed to it in such foundational documents as The Deed of Union (first adopted in 1932 and amended from time to time by subsequent Conferences) and The Methodist Church Act 1976, and involves responsibility for the “government, discipline, management and administration”¹ of the Church’s affairs.
4. The Conference Review Group believes that this aspect of being the governing body of the Methodist Church under God is extremely important. Much of the activity of the Conference consists of the exercise of governance or formal authority. The Conference does this directly through adopting formal policies and legislation. It also does it indirectly by setting the parameters and structures of accountability and support for other bodies to exercise authority in its name in particular places or areas of work. Similarly with regard to management, the role of the Conference is to set a framework of clear policies and purposes, authorising and permitting others to exercise management directly, and seeking to ensure that they do so under the guidance of the Spirit and in an attitude of stewardship. The direct exercise of management is the duty of those other individuals and groups. It is their responsibility to formulate specific and detailed strategies for enacting the Conference’s policies and fulfilling its purposes; for setting particular objectives concerning the implementation of those strategies; for deploying human, material and technological resources to achieve those objectives; and for monitoring and assessing the performance of individuals and groups in meeting the objectives.

¹. Deed of Union Clause 18.

5. Another way in which the Conference expresses oversight is in the collective exercise of leadership. This involves harvesting the insights of its members, inspiring them to be imaginative and empowering them to share their ideas and develop new vision. It then involves the Conference in providing a model for the rest of the Connexion of articulating vision, of initiating action and encouraging people to follow, and of exercising power (not least with regard to the management of resources) with authority, justice and love.
6. All of these aspects of oversight involve waiting on God. For this to happen there has to be space in the overall timetable for there to be times of spontaneous prayer, praise and contemplation as well as formal prayer and structured worship. But waiting on God also occurs through Christian Conferring. This involves people taking spiritual, theological and practical counsel together and engaging in processes of intentional, prayerful and thoughtful dialogue that lead to collective decision-making. Some of this occurs informally through people meeting each other over meals and at fringe and other events around the sessions of the Conference. Much of it occurs in the formal business of the Conference itself as people seek to discern the will and activity of God through paying attention to each other's insights and experience. The Conference should primarily be looking for the inspiration of the Spirit, and in the light of that to lift the spirits of its members and provide inspiration for the whole Connexion.
7. The Review Group therefore recommends that the Conference affirm that **the primary purpose of the Conference is to engage in Christian Conferring in order to discern the will of God and then to formulate and oversee ways in which the whole Connexion can respond to that will.** This purpose should inform and influence everything that the Conference does.

ANNEX B

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN ANY FURTHER WORK

1. Would a smaller Conference make it much harder to achieve the diversity objective set in SO 417(2) and the Church's wider policies on equality, diversity and inclusion? How might the objectives of a diverse Conference be better achieved? Should an average age profile or demographic be set enabling a younger and/or more diverse set of views about the future of the Church to be expressed? And, if so, how might that be achieved in practice?
2. Should the present balance between *ex-officio* and District elected seats (currently 27% and 73%) be maintained if the size of Conference is further reduced? And if not, at what point would a reduction in District elected seats lead to the Conference becoming insufficiently representative of the wider church?
3. What, if any, changes should be made in the specific membership currently specified in the Deed of Union (the three-year Presidency, the Secretary, the Chairs of District, the Warden of the MDO, the President and Secretary of the Irish Conference, two other persons appointed by each of the Irish Conference and the General Conference of the UMC, and two persons chosen from among the associate members appointed by other Churches)?
4. Which, if any, other matters laid down in the Deed of Union (the existence of the categories of Conference-elected and Youth Assembly representatives and the requirement that half of the members of Conference must be lay) should be reconsidered?
5. Noting that the Oversight and Trusteeship proposals will affect some of this list, which, if any, changes in the numbers of *ex-officio* and other seats set in SOs should be considered (these are currently the number of Conference elected representatives, the number of Youth Assembly representatives, and the following office holders: the Assistant Secretary of the Conference, the Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice, the Record Secretary, the Journal Secretary, the Convener of the Memorials Committee, and the Chair of the Business Committee, the Chairs of the Methodist Council and the SRC, the lead Connexional Treasurer, the Connexional Secretaries (currently one), a commissioned forces chaplain, two persons serving overseas, six persons representing EDI interests and one representative of the F&O Committee, of the L&P Committee, of the Stationing Committee and of Methodist Women in Britain respectively)?
6. Should the suggestions about involving members of Conference in conferring about or in scrutinising work between Conferences (paragraph 26 of this report) and other possible new ways of working be taken forward and, if so, by whom and on what timescale?