

39. Report of the Working Group on 'Fellowships Groups'

Contact Name and Details	The Revd Dr Martyn D Atkins, Secretary of the Conference and General Secretary generalsecretary@methodistchurch.org.uk
Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	Decision
Resolutions	39/1. The Conference receives the Report. 39/2. The Conference affirms the recommendations set out in the Report and directs that further work as indicated in the Report is overseen by the One Mission Forum and in respect of 7.2 by the Secretary of the Conference.

Summary of Content

Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task given to the Fellowships Working Group • General Themes • Practical Implications • Proposed recommendations for the Conference
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	The General Secretary's report to the 2014 Conference
Consultations	Fellowship Groups, World Church Relationships staff, Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network staff, EDI Forum

Summary of Impact

Wider Connexional	Work aims at greater integration of Fellowship Groups across the Connexion
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39. Report of the Working Group on 'Fellowship Groups'

The Task and the Group

1. The General Secretary's report to the 2014 Conference requested that a working group be set up to carry out work on the subject of *"the growing number of language and/or ethnically configured Methodist congregations and fellowships now found in very many parts of our Connexion"* and report to the Council before bringing proposals to the Conference.
2. Members of the working group were:
 - The Revd Dr Martyn D Atkins Secretary of the Conference and General Secretary
 - The Revd Dr Claire R Potter Superintendent minister/deputy convener
 - The Revd William Davis Ghanaian Methodist Fellowship
 - The Revd Edson Dube Zimbabwean Methodist Fellowship
 - Mr John Hicks QC Law and Polity Committee
 - The Revd Nicholas A Oborksi Superintendent with oversight of Chinese speaking congregation
 - The Revd Dr Ayodeji E Okegbile Nigerian Methodist Fellowship
 - Sister Eluned Williams Synod Cymru
 - Jenny Yeung Birmingham Chinese Methodist Church

Advisers:

 - Ms Jennifer Crook Connexional Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Adviser
 - Mr David Friswell World Church Relationships Team Leader
 - The Revd John A Squares Development Officer, North West and Mann Region, Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network, specialism in discipleship
3. A number of documents were circulated which contributed to the group's work:
 - The General Secretary's report to the 2014 Conference;
 - Notes from the Fellowships Day Conference 25 November 2014;
 - The "Belonging Together" project report;
 - Internal Connexional Team report 'Diverse Ministries in the Methodist Church';
 - Internal Connexional Team report on statistics "Belonging Together – Findings of research with Fellowship Groups";
 - Introductory briefing paper for the working group.
4. Two meetings were held, one in December 2014 and another in February 2015, in addition to a day conference in November 2014.

Three broad areas

5. The group focused on three broad areas:
 - **(Deepening) Relationships**– relationships between groupings making our plural Connexion are healthy in many areas and are deepening and developing, though there is some way to go. Fellowship Groups are clear that the deepening of relationships within and between churches and groupings must include a commitment to sharing a live spirituality rather than, for example, merely space in a building.

- **(Mutual) Partnerships** - it was recognised that British Methodism is good at holding a number of existing partnerships, which are largely useful and valued. The significance of *mutually enriching* partnership remains a key factor over future years, and must involve actively bearing witness to a common faith together.
- **(Genuine) Integration**- the value of which is relevant and vital in many areas of the life of churches. Learning, accepting, growing together without assimilation was the best and necessary way ahead. The group came to recognise that in some cultures, the role of current leaders was vital in any integrative process, and therefore time and resources were needed to be allocated to bringing leaders in various groupings together.

Key themes

6. The group identified six key themes, each requiring continuing or further reflection and action:
- (i) Affirmation that all groups want to be Methodist and connected – there is **One Mission** and in most cases an awareness of a ‘World family of Methodism’ and an appreciation of being a part of it. One Methodist people of God are involved in the same mission of God, and therefore healthy integration without assimilation is right and proper.
 - (ii) Increasing numbers of Methodists from around the world are part of the Methodist Church in Britain. What impact this should have on the Church’s structures in Britain was a question requiring careful but urgent consideration. How to be a **flexible and faithful** Methodist Church in Britain today was a key issue.
 - (iii) The role and help of Fellowship Groups in reclaiming and embodying **Methodist identity** in the British Methodist Church today was seen as a gift and an offer.
 - (iv) The recognition that Fellowship Groups are in **different places** in terms of their (current) needs, intentions, size, organisation and expectations must not be forgotten: one policy or process is unlikely to ‘fit’ all such Groups.
 - (v) The importance of healthily **connecting** everyone belonging to a Worldwide Methodist movement through a single connexional Methodist Church in Britain was the aim and intention, but required continuing and intentional work to ensure that this came about: it would not simply ‘happen’.
 - (vi) A recognition of the level of **support** already given by different groupings in relation to Fellowship Groups.

Practical implications arising from these themes

Some practical implications and observations associated with each of the themes listed above were also identified by the group:

6.1 One Mission

- There is no deep intent or desire among Fellowship Groups to establish another Methodist Church in Britain – we are one family. Hence there is no desire to develop non-geographical circuits or other special processes which mark ‘difference’ rather than our belonging together. There is though a desire for the British Methodist Church and Fellowship Groups to be flexible and humble enough to change so as more truly to be one connexion.

- We need to listen to and learn from other parts of the world where 'One Church, One Mission' is proving fruitful and providing good models of integration and partnership.

6.2 Flexible and faithful

- Structures that include people from Methodist Churches around the world must be identified and implemented – including:
 - Representation at the annual Conference and district synods. The group considered the issue of representation carefully and consequently suggests that
 - a) Consideration be given to whether an agreed number of representatives of Fellowship Groups should be representatives to the Conference, as a temporary measure, and that the Secretary of the Conference oversees consideration of this suggestion, and
 - b) That both ministers and members associated with Fellowship Groups seek, and be strongly encouraged to seek, election to the annual Conference and district synods, through the normal processes which, in order to be eligible, require ministers to be stationed in the district concerned, and lay people to hold Methodist membership within the district concerned.
 - Candidating – it is important to encourage development of leaders from Fellowship Groups and find apt contexts in which the call of God to ordained ministries might be discerned.
 - Stationing matching – While stationing matching often works well in terms of linking language, cultural identity and gifts with needs, this needs reinforcing and encouraging. There is no desire to create an alternative process for Fellowship Groups while being mindful that care and thought are needed to increase the level of healthy integration and enriching of the Connexion, together with the sensible and sensitive matching of ministers to particular language and cultural groupings and congregations.
- Evangelism – Consideration needs to be given how the skills and experiences (within Fellowship Groups) of evangelism and church growth can be most effectively shared with other parts of the Methodist Church in Britain.

6.3 Methodist identity

- Renewing an understanding of commitment to the Methodist tradition (Fellowship Groups as 'Agents of Renewal') – helping the relearning of Methodist history and theology, while recognising that the Methodist Church in different countries has developed Methodism in different ways. Some are enormously healthy and encouraging and greater intent, energy and flexibility is required of us all to embrace a wider normative expression of Godly Methodism. Equally, not all will be appropriate to 'reclaim' in a contemporary British context. There are also differing understandings of ecumenism among Methodists from different parts of the world. How to learn, discern and change for good is an area needing further exploration.
- Vibrant worship and openness to the communication of God's Spirit through the many voices in the Methodist Church in Britain.
- Fellowship Groups are usually located 'in between' grass roots and the Connexion, which could help integration.

6.4 Different places

- Integration is preferred to coexistence. Guidelines on healthy integration are needed at connexional level so that structures are in place when Methodists arrive in Britain. These

need to recognise the different histories, patterns and models of Fellowship Groups and chaplaincies.

- An advisory or support group is needed at connexional level.
 - This group is to guide Fellowship Groups into fuller integration and to encourage members of Fellowship Groups to become full members of the Methodist Church.
 - This may only need to be a temporary group and will work alongside existing structures.
 - This group needs to communicate across difference and to include representation from all Fellowship Groups and smaller groups which are not (yet) formally Fellowship Groups.
 - The group could send an agreed number of representatives to the Conference as a temporary measure until members of Fellowship Groups are more integrated into districts and can then be nominated through the usual processes.
 - It is important to consider how all this relates to the work of the One Mission Forum, and where it is 'located' in terms of accountability, etc.
 - This group would be similar in providing support for Fellowship Groups as the Superintendents' conference does for Superintendents.
- Language is a major issue for some groups and less so for others. Inclusion is vital even if translation inevitably makes services and meetings longer.
- Funding is running out for some chaplaincies. The model of half time in circuit and half time as chaplain generally works well, but it was noted that where the 50% connexional funding comes from is not always yet determined. Further discussion is needed and the group is aware that helpful conversations are under way with members of the Connexional Grants Committee.

6.5 Connecting

- Methodist identity is seen as more important than cultural identity, yet *cultural* links are often the first people look for when arriving in Britain. Fellowship Groups help greatly diverse people connect with their Methodist identity.
- The Methodist Church in Britain needs to recognise that people arrive in Britain for many different reasons (eg economic, family, displacement, temporary, permanent). These have a differing impact on people's connections with churches. The Methodist Church and Fellowship Groups need to be aware of these different contexts and engage more intelligently and sensitively with them.
- The need and value of hospitality towards new groups of 'migrant' Methodists arriving is vital. Some say they have experienced a lack of welcome from British Methodism which has encouraged the establishment of independent churches outside the Fellowship Group structures.
- Orientation is vital – particularly for ministers arriving into the British Methodist Church. However orientation must be 'two way'. Roles may have the same name in different parts of the world church yet there are very different expectations attached to them. Both ministers and churches need better awareness of this. Gifts and previous training need to be recognised better and barriers overcome (eg language). The whole subject of orientation requires continuing careful thought, and the group is encouraged that such work is intended to be undertaken by appropriate bodies and urges that insights arising from the Fellowship Groups be included in this developing work.

- A greater 'permissiveness' was discerned to be needed, and, rightly or wrongly, the group heard how rules and process in the Methodist Church in Britain sometimes appear inflexible and unduly restrictive in relation to the experience of Methodism in other parts of the world.
- The need to provide more points of connection with the work of the World Church Relationships Team and others so that the global nature of the Methodist Church is more deeply visible and embedded throughout the Connexion. The group is encouraged to hear of a 'vision' paper for the future of World Church activity, and urges that insights from this group be fed into that process of renewing vision and focus.
- Other models of leadership than 'chaplaincy' were considered to see if a better model could be found. The group concluded that, at least for the foreseeable near future, the current model was appropriate and generally effective, while recognising that Fellowship Group chaplaincies are significantly different from others (eg hospital, prison, industrial, forces and university chaplaincies, which all tend, to a greater degree, to have the chaplain relating to largely 'secular' institutions or organisations).

6.6 Support

- The gift of support from overseas partner churches towards the Fellowship Groups' ministries should not be overlooked. This comes mainly through personnel and through finance.
- For example, the Methodist Church in Hong Kong sends funding to Methodism in Britain of more than £100k per year to support both Chinese ministry and other areas of the British Church's work.
- For example, Malaysia, Nigeria, Ghana and Fiji (and several other Methodist Churches) offer the time, gifts and support of senior ministers from their churches to come and work in Britain. This 'loss' of key staff from their own local churches and conferences should not be underestimated as a real gift to the Methodist Church in Britain.

7. Recommendations

Having considered the themes and implications set out above the group presented the report to the Council and now brings the following recommendations to the Conference. The recommendations aim to bring about deeper relationships, mutual partnerships and genuine integration of Fellowship Groups with the Connexion of which they are part. The recommendations are listed below, and the Conference is invited to offer its views on what is proposed:

- 7.1 Set up a connexional advisory/support group for Fellowship Groups. The group to comprise a representative of each of the larger Fellowship Group and some smaller groups. The role of the group is to support Fellowship Groups, share good practice, encourage full and healthy integration and encourage members to become full members of the Methodist Church. The group would also act as an advisory group for the Methodist Church, particularly in relation to encouraging vocational discernment and providing orientation for ministers, leaders and churches.
- 7.2 Consider whether an agreed number of representatives of 'fellowship groups' should be representatives to the Conference as a temporary measure. (The group is aware of the sensitivity of this recommendation, and the careful way in which the current size and construction of the Conference is determined, but believes that the Secretary of the Conference might oversee consideration of this matter.)
- 7.3 Involve Fellowship Group input to planning *3Generate*.

- 7.4 Ensure the needs of Fellowship Groups are fed into the new modules of the new local preacher and worship leader training, as appropriate.
- 7.5 Develop connexional guidelines on 'healthy integration'.
- 7.6 Address and clarify the issue of funding for Fellowship Group chaplaincies.
- 7.7 Continue to provide orientation for ministers from other countries who are coming into the British stations, and expand it to include: ministers who come through different routes, church members, preachers and church communities. The new advisory/support group can assist in developing this and connecting with an appropriate 'reclaiming' of Methodist heritage.

8. Conclusion

If the Conference approves the recommendations, further work is needed to be undertaken. Some work can be annexed onto work already being undertaken by others, other work cannot.

The group proposes that an overview of the work needing to be undertaken as identified in this report is held in the future by the One Mission Forum, which, at least in the first instance, is also responsible for the formation and accountability of the proposed Advisory Support Group.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

39/1. The Conference received the Report

39/2. The Conference affirmed the recommendations set out in the Report and directed that further work as indicated in the Report is overseen by the One Mission Forum and in respect of 7.2 by the Secretary of the Conference.