

Research Response to NoM 2015/204 'Impact of Mapping A Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission'

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Resolution	66/1. The Council receives the report.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	Building on stage one research, to report stage two research and offer an evidence based response to NoM 2015/204
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	This paper is a response to NOM 2015/204 and based on MC 15/96. Documents consulted included <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Secretary's Report to the Conference 2007; • MC/11/10 <i>Regrouping for Mission</i>: Report to Methodist Council January 2011 • 'District Development Enablers Project Review' <i>Report from Hilary Barnard and Irene MacWilliam, MacWilliam Consulting</i>. Review completed in December 2011, and published in 2012. • MC/16/37 Research Response to NoM 2015/204
Main Points	Introduction Methodology Definition of a Very Large Circuit Superintendency in Very Large Circuits Evangelism within Methodism Research Conclusions
Consultations	Quantitative research undertaken with Chairs, Superintendents, Presbyters, Deacons, Senior Circuit Stewards; qualitative research undertaken with twenty four circuits; analysis of <i>Statistics for Mission</i> .

Research Response to NoM 2015/204 ‘ Impact of Mapping A Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission’

NoM 2015/204 from the Methodist Conference 2015 says:

The Conference:

- *notes with appreciation the significant impact the initiative of Mapping the Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission has had on the life of the Methodist Church for almost a decade – helping Circuits to review their readiness for mission and the structures needed to facilitate that mission;*
- *notes that a significant consequence of this work has been the reconfiguring of many Circuits;*
- *recognises that there are many anecdotes as to the perceived positive and negative effects of such reconfigurations for both large and small Circuits;*

However there has never been any quantitative or qualitative research into the impact and effect of Mapping the Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission for the mission of the Church. Given that the process has now been underway for almost a decade the Conference is of the view that the time for a formal research project examining the evidence would be extremely helpful to the Church as it continues to reshape for effective mission in the twenty-first century.

The Conference therefore directs the Methodist Council to make arrangements for and oversee such research and report its findings to the Conference of 2016. This may be an interim report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Under direction of MC/15/96, the Strategic Research Team (SRT) of The Methodist Church undertook research between October 2015 and March 2016 to seek to provide ‘a clear definition of a “large” circuit and identify how many exist over the Connexion. This plainly set out the amount of reconfiguration that has occurred and where it has occurred geographically and contextually and pointed to some of the consequences of that reconfiguration.’
- 1.2 This was reported as MC 16-37 to Council and stage two research agreed to confirm or otherwise the interim findings. Stage two research was carried out by the SRT with the significant involvement of the Susanna Wesley Foundation, Southlands Methodist Trust. This partnership has proved very helpful in increasing research capacity at no additional financial cost to the Methodist Church.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 It was agreed that stage two research would involve further documentary, qualitative and quantitative research. The methods used in the second stage of the research mirrored those used in the first stage in order both to ensure rigour and to enable comparative analysis. The research thus involved questionnaires, interviews and case studies. Questionnaires were sent to a proportion of presbyters, deacons and church stewards, with 81, 23 and 113 responses respectively.
- 2.2 Ten case studies were conducted in the second stage of the research, including four very large circuits, three large, two medium and two small circuits. Of these, eight had regrouped, one

was in the process of re-grouping, and another had chosen not to join adjacent circuits which had regrouped.

- 2.3 A particular theme around the challenges of superintendency in very large and large circuits was identified in the stage one research. Thus, several very large circuits, as defined in stage one research, were chosen as the subject of case studies in order to explore the implications for superintendency in these contexts (alongside the impact of the regrouping on other areas of circuit life). To probe further, conversations were also held separately from the case study research with three superintendents who had experience of superintendency in very large circuits.
- 2.4 Each of the themes which emerged in the first stage of the research were examined in the light of the new data gathered in stage two. Overall the second stage of the research affirms the findings made in the first stage.
- 2.5 A full research report will be available at the 2017 Conference. This will evidence and document comprehensively the findings, many of which go beyond the precise requirements of responding to NoM 15/205. The Director of SRI will ensure that the insights of this full report will be drawn to the attention of appropriate office holders within Methodism, and that the findings will additionally be communicated to the Methodist people through a variety of ways.

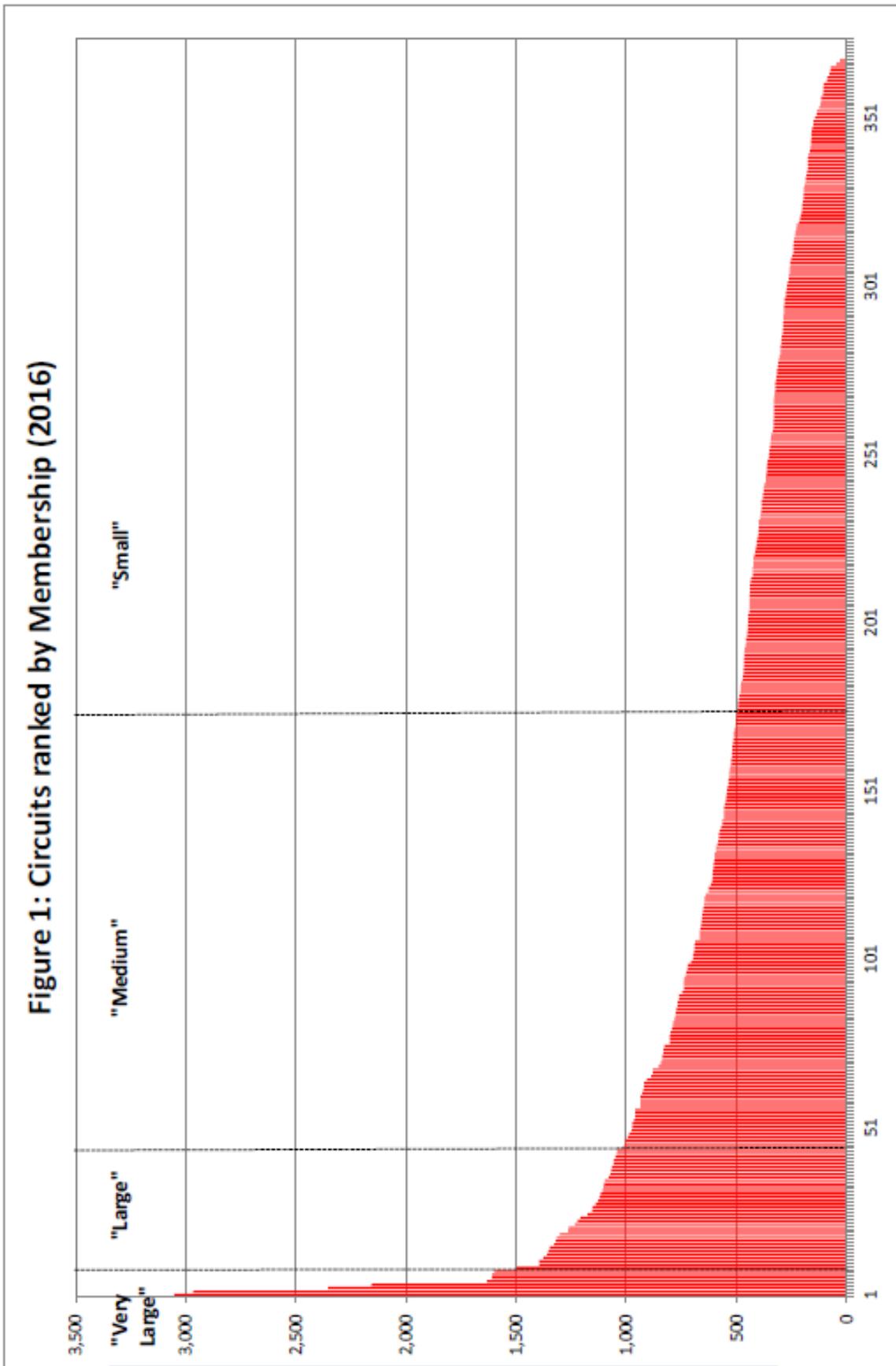
3. Defining a Very Large Circuit

- 3.1 Stage one research developed a four level categorisation of Methodist circuits. This has been tested in stage two research, and at a number of forums such as superintendents' conferences. A number of alternatives that involved geography, number of church councils, ministerial deployment and staffing levels were considered. However, using membership gives a level of consistency that other factors do not appear to achieve, consequently the same four level categorisation is maintained.
 - a) Very large circuit – having 1500 or more members (Sep 2016 there were 8 such circuits)
 - b) Large circuit – having 1000-1499 members (Sep 2016 there were 39 such circuits)
 - c) Medium circuit – having 500-999 members (Sep 2016 there were 126 such circuits)
 - d) Small circuit – having less than 500 members (Sep 2016 there were 195 such circuits)
- 3.2 What additionally became clear is that this designation may be a helpful way for Methodism to use in conversation regarding the life of Methodism, but there is no expressed need for these categories to become established in Standing Orders.

Table 1: Analysis of Circuit Reorganisation by District, 2007 to 2016

District	2007 Circuits	Transferred to other Districts	Transferred from other Districts	In- District Mergers	2016 Circuits	"Real" Reduction Circuit numbers (%)
1 Synod Cymru	13			-12	1	92.3
15 Isle of Man	3			-2	1	66.7
16 Leeds	18	-3	+1	-10	6	62.5
7 Bristol	22			-13	9	59.1
27 West Yorkshire	19	-1	+3	-12	9	57.1
28 Wolverh'ton and Shrewsbury	23		+3	-14	12	53.8
25 Sheffield	17	-1		-8	8	50.0
11 Chester and Stoke-on-Trent	23			-11	12	47.8
18 Liverpool	19	-2		-8	9	47.1
29 York and Hull	23		+1	-11	13	45.8
26 Southampton	25			-11	14	44.0
36 South East	28			-11	17	39.3
5 Birmingham	21	-3		-7	11	38.9
2 Wales	25			-9	16	36.0
22 Nottingham and Derby	24		+1	-9	16	36.0
21 (North) Lancashire	16		+2	-6	12	33.3
34 Beds, Essex and Herts	18			-6	12	33.3
24 Plymouth and Exeter	23			-6	17	26.1
17 Lincolnshire	16			-4	12	25.0
20 Newcastle upon Tyne	16			-4	12	25.0
35 London	46			-11	35	23.9
6 Bolton and Rochdale	10	-1	+1	-2	8	20.0
9 Cumbria	15			-3	12	20.0
12 Cornwall	20			-4	16	20.0
14 East Anglia	18			-3	15	16.7
13 Darlington	14	-1		-2	11	15.4
31 Scotland	8			-1	7	12.5
19 Manchester and Stockport	20			-1	19	5.0
23 Northampton	24			-1	23	4.2
10 Channel Islands	2			0	2	0.0
32 Shetland	1			0	1	0.0
Total	570				368	

Figure 1: Circuits ranked by Membership (2016)



4. Superintendency in Very Large Circuits

- 4.1 The variety of models of superintendency within very large circuits was a particular focus of stage two research. This is also relevant to some circuits in the large category as any demarcation between categories is somewhat arbitrary. Alongside the standard pattern (ie a superintendent having pastoral charge of one or more churches alongside their superintendent role), two other models of superintendency are practised within the group of very large circuits: separated superintendency, where the superintendent does not have pastoral charge of a named church(es), and co-superintendency, when a group of ministers take on the role jointly and none is appointed as lead superintendent.
- 4.2 A separated superintendency releases the office holder's time and gifts and allows them to circulate and work alongside a range of different churches in the circuit. Further, their relationships with the circuit churches may be helped because there is no sense in which they can be seen as partisan, as likely to favour 'their own' church(es). Although the superintendent does have responsibility for the circuit as a whole, the lack of a specific church is seen as a loss by some superintendents who would not feel called to such an appointment. As with all models, however, it can be argued that success depends on a number of variables – the individual's understanding of their calling, their particular gifts and leadership style, and the particular context presented by the circuit. In terms of stationing, a separated superintendency would not be attractive to all presbyters, but, equally, a very large circuit does not have universal appeal, with some responses to the research suggesting that fear of being stationed to a very large circuit is a reason not to offer for superintendency. (It appears that Regrouping for Mission has had a negative impact on the likelihood of presbyters offering for superintendency in the future.)
- 4.3 Similarly, a range of factors determine the success of co-superintendency. There are different ways of organizing this approach in terms of the division of responsibilities but it is suggested that a functional split or each superintendent having different briefs and specialisms works well, while an allocation along geographical lines is to be avoided. A willingness to be flexible and take on issues as they emerge according to the situation is necessary, as is a readiness to trust one's colleagues and give them permission to act. That the ministers are collectively the superintendent, and are all responsible for the whole, has been a useful notion for one group of co-superintendents who would identify themselves not as a team but as a community, as people who can be vulnerable with one another, and who recognize one another's strengths and weaknesses and allocate tasks and responsibilities accordingly. It is apparent that co-superintendency requires a particular mindset and careful nurture (which can helpfully be facilitated by someone skilled who is external to the group) but the arrangement can pay dividends in meeting the needs of a very large circuit. The mutual support, the sharing of responsibilities and of accountability is particularly valued by those in co-superintendencies as is the flexibility it offers. One of the concerns often expressed about this model is that there is a need for a nominated leader, but the possibility to evolve systems and patterns for effective decision-making has been demonstrated.
- 4.4 A number of observations about the requisite gifts and graces for appointment as a superintendent of a very large circuit have application in smaller contexts. A key emphasis is the need to be able to think strategically and to see the bigger picture. The ability to carry out managerial and administrative work is noted. Particularly important in large and very large circuits is the skill in identifying what is required and in seeking out those with appropriate gifts and skills, building teams, motivating them and cultivating an atmosphere where new ways of doing things are supported. Prior experience in management and leadership outside the church can be very helpful but cannot be regarded as a pre-requisite. Prior experience as a superintendent - preferably in more than one Methodist context - before coming to a very

large circuit is, however, seen as important (for single superintendency – perhaps less so for co-superintendency). In a co-superintendency situation, the need to be able properly to collaborate, to share with others, to cede control and not to be too self-contained are vital, but, arguably, these propensities have applicability in all very large circuits because of the weight and extent of the responsibilities involved.

- 4.5 Whilst prior experience may mean that some are more prepared for these particular roles than are others, conversations with superintendents in very large circuits suggested that more attention needs to be given to the identification of potential and to the preparation and support of all superintendents from which the pool of superintendents for very large circuits may eventually be drawn. There is a role for superintendents themselves in identifying those presbyters who have the potential to take on superintendency, and perhaps eventually superintendency of very large circuits. There could be opportunities for such individuals to develop the appropriate mindset and knowledge whilst still in their current role. Conversations with District Chairs who could make recommendations would be helpful. A greater recognition that superintendency is not about seniority but about a particular set of gifts and skills would be helpful and may eventually feed into the process of appointing superintendents to very large circuits.
- 4.6 In relation to training for superintendents of very large circuits, it is suggested that further preparation for superintendency at an earlier stage may pay dividends in providing a good foundation for any future appointment. An extended induction for new superintendents could be considered. This might include a longer period of support within the first such appointment with periodic meetings and peer support, and pairing new superintendents with a more experienced superintendent for ongoing mentoring.
- 4.7 For those who are already superintendents of very large circuits, the opportunity to meet and share with other superintendents, whether also in very large circuits (which can be particularly helpful) or in different situations, is very much valued. District gatherings of superintendents are appreciated, and sharing issues and situations at the annual Superintendents' Conference is also appreciated by some.
- 4.8 Whilst there is some concern about the specific arrangements for supervision, the prospect of high-quality supervision is particularly welcomed by some superintendents of very large circuits.

5.0 Evangelism within Methodism

- 5.1 Stage one research identified a weakness related to Methodism and mission, specifically in fulfilling part of Our Calling 'to make more followers of Jesus Christ'. Through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods churches and groups were identified which were making more followers of Jesus Christ, and interviews and focus groups were conducted with these case study churches.
- 5.2 Intentionality was found to be a key component of successful evangelism, and this was important in both the minister(s) and the laity, with both playing a crucial role in the evangelistic process. In all instances the work of front line evangelism fell primarily to the members of the church rather than the ordained leadership. The role of the minister was, therefore, to equip and empower the laity; to build confidence and capacity, and create a culture of evangelism. In this way evangelism became a responsibility of all rather than a select few.
- 5.3 Opportunities for evangelism were found through deep engagement with the community, and in many cases this was only possible through the membership rather than the ordained leadership. Where ministers were often required to work across broad geographical areas and

diverse communities, the members of the churches were already embedded within the community. It once again, therefore, fell to the ministers to empower and embolden the members of the church to discuss their faith with individuals with whom there was a pre-existing connection.

- 5.4 Once points of connection were established, the importance of pathways into the life of the church were emphasised. It was not seen to be realistic in most instances for an individual interested in faith but with no pre-existing connection with Methodism to 'enter' the church through Sunday morning worship, and a more gradual introduction was required. For this reason, respondents advocated a varied offering with different ways for individuals to deepen and develop in their faith, understanding that those being reached are at diverse points on a journey. The importance of consistently high-quality worship was, however, highlighted, and local lay ministry, worship leading and 'hosting' of services by members of the local community were common themes.
- 5.5 Throughout the research 'authenticity' was frequently mentioned, and this was linked to Christianity permeating every facet of the evangelising individual's life rather than being a compartmentalized element. For this reason, although evangelism was defined as making more followers of Jesus Christ, respondents did not simply identify this as increasing attendance or membership numbers but as developing the faith of those coming in to enable them to be witnesses within their communities.
- 5.6 The research raised a number of factors, processes and events which can influence the ability of Methodism to make more followers of Jesus Christ, and these will be the subject of further study, research and dissemination for the benefit of Methodism.

6.0 Research Conclusions

- 6.1 When the insights from both stage one and stage two are considered together, there are a number of themes that emerge regarding the impact of the Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission process. The themes that emerge from the research are consistent. There was no significant difference between the insights from stage one and stage two, or between the qualitative, quantitative and case study approaches. This triangulation and consistency enables a strong degree of confidence in the findings.
 - a) **Process:** As a process, this has been experienced as largely positive, although not uniformly so. Circuits are able successfully to address the administrative issues that arise although in some cases it appears that circuits have had to discover ways of dealing with issues that are known elsewhere in Methodism but not widely shared. There is an emotional cost borne in particular by superintendents and some circuit officers. The support of chairs and others during this period has been greatly valued although there was a variety of approach. The level of support that Methodist members gave to their previous circuits has been largely transferred to the regrouped entity. Regrouped circuits appear to be stronger entities than their predecessors and addressed, to some extent, financial and other challenges that were making some previous circuit had to sustain. This level of improvement is significant and has enabled a further generation of circuit life in some places.
 - b) **Membership:** RfM has not had a significant impact on membership. Circuits have not experienced numerical growth through RfM; indeed decline has remained fairly constant. Variety in rates appears to be largely due to local factors rather than RfM.
 - c) **Mission:** Mission focus in intent has sometimes been a prime motivating reason, but administrative factors around regrouping have, in the initial years of regrouping,

absorbed large amounts of time and energy. The qualitative research in particular points to mission as the key area where Methodism needs now to focus. The specific evangelism research indicates that Methodism can make more followers, but is currently not doing so in significant numbers.

- d) **Staffing:** Regrouped circuits are being staffed by a small reduction in ordained staff and a small increase in lay employees who are normally in roles related to administration, finance and property. This is occurring in an era when numbers of candidates for ordination are lower.
- e) **Superintendency:** A variety of models provides some challenges, but flexibility enables circuits to express superintendency in a variety of ways that are considered to be contextually appropriate. Standing Orders have enough flexibility to enable this. Additional preparation and support for superintendents of large and very large circuits, in particular, will assist those office holders in carrying out the level of responsibility such appointments entail.
- f) **Circuit Officials:** There are fewer circuit officials needed when a number of circuits regroup. For example, when five circuits come together there is only one treasurer, one safeguarding officer etc needed. However, the reduction in numbers needed is somewhat offset by the increased responsibilities of such positions and consequently some very large circuits now have paid employees carrying out some of these responsibilities formerly undertaken by volunteers in the past. The case studies in particular raised issues regarding the wellbeing of circuit officials, and of ministerial colleagues, during the RfM process and especially where large and very large circuits emerged.
- g) **Connexionalism:** This research has noted an ambivalent relationship from local congregations and to some extent from circuits towards being part of a Connexion. This perspective is noted alongside the ongoing conversations regarding 'Issues of Connexionalism in the 21st Century' (Conference 2015).

***RESOLUTION

66/1. The Council receives the report.