



Feeling Connected? A study on the Methodists' Awareness of Organisational Structures within their Church

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November 2021

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Executive Summary¹

This report outlines the findings of a preliminary study on the awareness of local congregation members of the different structural layers of the Methodist Church. Based on 24 semi-structured interviews with Circuit leaders, Ministers, lay leaders and regular members of the congregation, the researchers identified a lack of a clear understanding of the relevance of Circuit, District and Connexion to local church life. While church members felt the closest to the Circuit, they were hardly aware of the District, and Conference decisions were only relevant if there existed some personal connection or unless they directly impacted them, such as the same-sex marriage debate. Overall, we identified very different perceptions about the role and meaning of the different institutional layers among all three groups of respondents, even among some Ministers. In general, there was not a strong feeling of Connexion and identity amongst regular members of the congregation other than with the local church community and with Methodism as such. By contrast, Ministers and lay leaders with Circuit responsibility tended to have a stronger sense of a shared identity across the network.

Many respondents would love to see the Methodist church as an active and vibrant church. Yet, this research revealed several issues that prevent local churches from thriving. The main issues identified in the interviews included the maintenance of buildings, the effective use of resources and the issues around recruiting volunteers. Potential ways forward suggested by the research participants include the effective management of resources such as the building and the Ministers. The report concludes with some recommendations offered by the researchers as to how to prepare the Methodist Church for the future.

1 Introduction

This research project was commissioned by the Susanna Wesley Foundation for Kent Business School to explore how the Methodist Connexion is perceived in local churches. As part of this research question, we explored

- a. the impact of Conference decisions on local churches,
- b. the awareness of the Methodist institutional layers Circuit, District and Conference with their processes and resolutions, and
- c. the perception of the links between these layers.

The overall aim is to help the Methodist Church to better understand how much Methodists feel part of the Circuit, the District and the Connexion. The findings of this study can be linked to Keith Elford's report on *Change and Identity* in the sense that it confirms previously identified issues such as the identity crisis and lack of vision. This study also provides, however, some first answers to questions raised.²

The following report briefly describes the methodology applied for this study before summarising the key findings with regards to the reasons why people attend the Methodist Church and their perception of Connexion, Conference, District and Circuit, as well as some issues that concern local church members. The report further presents suggestions made by the respondents for potential ways forward and concludes with some recommendations based on these findings.

2 Methodology

This report presents the findings from 24 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted between May and July 2021 in two different Circuits from the same District and four different local churches. Interviews were held with senior leaders at Circuit level, Ministers (n=5), lay leaders (n=13), and ordinary members of the congregation (n=5). Some of the respondents had dual roles (n=3) and one respondent was interviewed twice. Interviews ranged from 70 minutes to 100 minutes. All interviews were fully transcribed and thematically analysed using the NVivo software.

3 Findings

3.1 Reasons for attending the Methodist Church

The researchers began interviews by asking respondents about the main reasons for attending their local church. Social relationships with friends and family, and "community feel" were mentioned as the most important reasons. Respondents felt that the Methodist Church was open to a wide range of people from different faith backgrounds and church traditions. They felt that their church was a safe place that embodied their values and beliefs. Some respondents valued being treated as individuals and being accepted as they are. Others wanted to give back to the church community, valued the diversity of people, or wanted to recharge their batteries. Only very few respondents mentioned that they came for the building or that they came to their church because it was the nearest. People further valued the way the Methodist Church takes people and their questions seriously – as one of the church leaders pointed out it, they encourage people to think on their own without telling them what to think. Members of the Methodist Church would take seriously the needs of others and understand that everyone has got to have a voice. Another reason cited was a sense of call to,

be a beacon for the community, to show the community that there is a way to do things and to work together. (Church B LL3)

The focus of the Methodist Church to serve the community was highly valued by the congregation members.

The expectations of the respondents on the Methodist Church were quite clear: to be open and welcoming to everybody: "if the church isn't open to everybody, then it's not a church" (Church D MoC2), but more importantly, respondents felt that the Methodist Church should be part of the local community and engage with social issues, as illustrated by the following quote from a member of a congregation:

A church that cuts itself off from the world around it, and the problems of the world around it, and the people who live within the catchment area of the church and all of their problems, the church that cuts itself off and says we are the pure Church of God is not a church that I really want to have anything to do with. (Church D MoC1)

3.2 Perception of management structure

3.2.1 General comments on management structure

Whilst investigating the general awareness of the management structure of the Methodist Church, some lay leaders and regular congregation members felt that the structure was not at all clear. One lay leader suggested that before people join the Methodist Church, they should be given some basic instruction on the way the Church operates. The structure should be visible and clearly communicated.

Several lay leaders admitted that they did not understand the role and meaning of the different institutional layers until they took on a lay leadership role:

I didn't really find out about the structure of the Methodist Church until I became church treasurer, and it was only really about at that point that I started to have an understanding of what Circuit and what District was. (Church B LL1)

While the formal Methodist Church structure seemed not as relevant to the local church members, some felt that another local management level was needed to provide a stable foundation for day-to-day decision making. The formation of leadership teams as a new layer of management in all local churches interviewed was deemed necessary for times when the church was without a Minister. It seemed to have been first introduced around 15 years ago in one local church whose Minister had the foresight to form a leadership team to enable the church to carry on in case full ministerial support was not available. It provided the local church with the necessary authority to make their own decisions and to move forward. In many local churches, the leadership team consisted of one representative from each of the responsibilities. The leadership team would run the church on a daily and weekly basis and would then report to the Church Council to make the big decisions and so:

The beauty of a having a leadership team and that sort of number of people, which is you know, smaller than church council is that you can do things quicker. (Church A LL1)

This system also offered the opportunity to share responsibility and hence have the burden falling

on the shoulders of a limited number of people. Such a division of responsibility would also prevent the accumulation of power and responsibilities, as described in one of the local churches. The role of the Church Council in this mix of power dynamics varied. In one instance, one lay leader felt that "Church Council will probably agree to whatever the person in front is saying" (Church B LL1).

At local level, most churches had established different committees to deal with the various responsibilities of church life. Nevertheless, it was also felt that communication often stopped at committee level. As one lay leader suggested, "I'm not sure we're good at giving people forums to talk if they're not on a committee" (Church B LL1). In one case, it was felt that this mix of different groupings was undermining effectiveness, so the Minister was working with the Church Stewards to try and build up an effective system of committees around the leadership team.

Another aspect that was mentioned in the interviews was the way local churches felt represented at Synod and Conference. One Minister felt that District Synod needed to hear the views of all the local churches, even if individual representatives did not share those views. However, the Minister felt that local representatives actually tend to vote at District on the basis of their personal views rather than represent the full range of congregational opinion. This is, of course, the constitutional position, but nevertheless the Minister thought,

it's not a representation of what's happened at local level, is a representation of your personal views, so whoever gets on the Conference, if it is shaped by the personal views of those there, and not shaped by the fact that you are representing your local, your Circuit at these meetings. (Church B Min)

Another cleric mentioned how important it was to have the appropriate management structure in place before you can build a vision. A safe place with clear structures has to be created first before growth can be developed within the church.

The management structure and the formation of leadership teams and committees influences the power relations in local churches. The researchers noticed a shift in power relations in almost all churches, which was mainly caused by lay leaders being in post for too long and the lack of clerical leadership either because of weak leadership skills,

Several lay leaders admitted that they did not understand the role and meaning of the different institutional layers until they took on a lay leadership role.

vacancies or the limited presence of the Minister. An analysis of the relationship between Church Stewards and the Minister at both local and Circuit level proved to be interesting. Under the Methodist Constitution, both Stewards and Ministers are held to be the leaders, but in practice this does not seem to be the case. Also, in other churches, it was felt that the Church Stewards had very little say. In one particular case, the leadership group had taken over completely and had strengthened its position over the years when there was no Minister or a rather weak Minister. This led to major tensions as people who did not belong to this group felt shut down and ignored. When asked about what happened when Church Stewards insisted on their rights to lead, one lay leader explained that this would lead to a situation of crisis.

As a result, some Circuit Stewards felt their authority should be restored. In one Circuit, the Stewards had decided to meet “without ministerial control” (CCS2). The rationale for this seemed to be similar to the tactics used by various contemporary groups attempting to redress perceived power imbalances – that working independently as a group enables the membership to support each other in voicing alternative, independent views. Otherwise, as several lay leaders reported, Church Council generally agree with whatever the Minister proposes. Hence, as one lay leader in particular put it, there rarely is an open debate, with Council effectively rubber-stamping decisions. This leader explained that they had even been shouted down whenever they raised questions or concerns. In another church, one strong leader was said to have “tamed” the dominant lay leaders where it was felt Church Stewards had overstepped the mark and imposed decisions on the congregation. Problems with cliques were also mentioned, as well as entrenched power relations. There were some strong feelings in certain cases that Stewards did not listen to genuine concerns, and critical voices were often shut down.

3.2.2 Perceptions of Connexion

Even though the Methodist Church claims to be a connexional church, many of its members could not explain what this meant. In general, it seemed that lay leaders had gained a limited understanding once they had taken on a more involved role in the church, as indicated by this lay leader: “I have an understanding of Connexion; I think if I wasn’t in the role that I was in, I wouldn’t have a clue” (Church B LL1). One Church Secretary explained their understanding of Connexionalism:

In general, many felt that the Connexion does not feature at all significantly at congregational level unless the local church is directly affected.

it means the linking together of all elements of the Methodist church that bring it to conference, the decision-making body of the church. It includes the dissemination of those decisions through the District, through the Circuit and into the local churches. (Church C LL3)

One church leader explained the function of the Connexion as follows:

I think it holds together the denomination and has done historically. That’s the function of the Connexion, that kind of idea of connectionalism, we’re all together, we share together, we share resources, ministerial resources, financial resources and that kind of common collective conversation that we have at Conference every year and I think that’s been its function. (Min C)

Yet, in general, many felt that the Connexion does not feature at all significantly at congregational level unless the local church is directly affected, *i.e.*, when it costs money, affects stationing, or changes something at the local level. One lay leader explained:

if you went and spoke to the average member of the congregation, I don’t think they fully understand what it means. They just know it’s there, but they won’t be able to explain it. (Church B LL3)

Another lay leader explained:

I wouldn’t say that Connexion is something that features on a day-to-day basis, and it certainly doesn’t feature in agendas. Unless, you know, like the recent decision, there is something major to report. (Church A LL1)

In relation to Connexion, we were also interested in seeing how local churches within a Circuit worked together. Although one Church Steward claimed that if every church had to stand on its own feet, it would die relatively quickly, cooperation between local churches was very occasional. On rare occasions when it did happen, it was based on personal contacts with the closest churches nearby. In some cases, churches shared facilities, but in general, the respondents welcomed more collaboration as there would be little involvement with other churches in the Circuit. One lay leader explained that it is to do with personality and attitudes rather than actual structures.

3.2.3 Perceptions of Conference

We asked interviewees about their perception and awareness of Conference, yet, in many cases, lay leaders and ordinary members of the congregation were not aware of Conference in any significant degree, except in cases where members of their local church had been ordained. One member of the congregation stated:

I have very little idea what Conference does apart from meeting every year and talking about lots of things, and making decisions, which filter down, which we may or may not take any notice of. (Church C LL4)

Ministers confirmed this, saying that on the whole, most regular members would know nothing about what is being discussed at Conference and one cleric admitted that people do not feel engaged.

This year's Conference received more attention because of the controversial topic of same-sex marriage on the agenda. In most churches, respondents at all levels demonstrated awareness of the consultation process regarding this topic. Only in one church was it felt that there were not enough opportunities to discuss this issue. However, respondents explained that if it was not for this item on the agenda, Conference would have gone unnoticed as it had in previous years. Some Church Stewards suggested that about 50% of church members would have little to no knowledge of Conference even taking place; it tended to be something vaguely 'out there', all rather distant. One church leader said:

as far as the Connexion driving any real sense of passion or vision within the church, I think on a congregational level it really doesn't happen at all. The Connexion doesn't really inspire. (Min C)

Having said that, most respondents welcomed the structure Conference provides to the Methodist Church. It was remote, but a key part of the Methodist national structure. It was suggested by some that Conference had a key role in setting the agenda for local churches to debate. One church leader perceived the function of Connexion as follows:

it has increasingly become almost like a corporate kind of body that is overseeing a very large organisation and needs to keep lots of things in place, all the legalities, all the processes, all the

administration that needs to take place but it certainly has lost a lot of its capacity to drive a vision, to inspire, to kind of draw people forward, and it's largely around administration. Now it's largely you put money in, and you can draw money out and they'll make some big decisions about different elements of church life, but it doesn't function much more than that. (Min C)

Some Ministers and lay leaders felt that "some of the things that Conference are coming up with are so divorced from the reality of what's happening on the ground" (Church D Min) that decisions would only be implemented if they fitted to the current local agenda. Another Minister felt that Conference would not be a true representation of local churches. Yet, two other leaders offered a more pragmatic approach: they appreciated the resources provided but admitted that they would then decide locally whether and which to use depending on the local circumstances, as the local congregation would know best what works locally, and if the available resources would not be useful, then "I'll probably try and find a different way of doing things. That probably doesn't sound terribly connexional" (Church D Min). Another Minister summarised: "The good minister will ignore what's coming down and only use it when it helps him to gear that clear direction" (Church B Min).

Not even the Ministers felt that connected to Conference, because it was perceived as too disconnected from local congregational life.

Thus, not even the Ministers felt that connected to Conference because it was perceived as too disconnected from local congregational life and attended mostly by the same people year after year. This left some Ministers feeling left out when it came to broader national discussions and decision making. Building on that, there was

also a clear sense in the data that most respondents felt that a key function of Conference is to provide a focus for the 'national voice of Methodism' and to consider national issues of social ethics as well as Methodist practice.

Despite the acknowledged role of the Conference in decision making as well as providing a focal point for cohesion, structure and guidance, respondents felt that the annual gathering had turned into a substantial bureaucratic process, and that it was becoming increasingly difficult to see the added value. However, expectations were clear: Conference was primarily felt to be about facilitating and supporting local churches. Several times, lay leaders mentioned that the Conference should be a beacon. It should:

be providing materials helping church to

grow and providing ways and models of how churches can actually do strategy, help and support those ministers who don't have those skill sets. (Church B Min)

Thus, Conference should be supporting local churches rather than hindering them.

When asked about the impact of Conference decisions on local churches, many lay leaders felt unaware of any impact other than around safeguarding issues. In several cases, respondents could not see the relevance of Conference decisions to their local church. Only in one church, one Church Steward reported:

we've tried to implement justice, dignity and solidarity and equality, diversity and inclusion, are all policies which we are seeking to sort of put forward and to strengthen in our church life. (Church C LL3)

This 'local salience' seems to be a major factor in the impact Conference has at local level: as with the 'God in Love Unites Us' debate, churches tended to engage with the Conference agenda only where changes in church order or practice were controversial and/or directly affecting the local congregation. This led one Circuit leader to suggest that Conference needs a more authoritative tone:

this is a connexional strategy, now we need to talk about this, we need to do this because the Connexion has said X,Y and Z, so it adds an air of authority. (Min C)

Apparently, local churches are more likely to engage in general Methodist debates if Conference is more directive, as it was, for example, in the same-sex marriage debate.

Interestingly, however, perceptions of the role of Conference varied among Ministers. While one felt that the local churches should guide Conference in their agenda, another Minister felt that the Conference should guide local churches.

3.2.4 Perceptions of District

When asked about the District, it was felt that this institutional layer was more relevant for Ministers than for the congregation and lay leaders. One Minister summarised: "the District is a curious beast within Methodism in that it's more, I think, for the clergy as a means of support for us" (Church D Min). Consequently, mainly church leaders were able to

explain the role of the District. They appreciated the District for its encouragement and supervision, for laying out and clarifying processes, and for its expertise and advice in terms of safeguarding, disciplinary, property and financial issues. Some mentioned the training provided by District colleagues. One church leader, in particular, talked about their expectation of the District, and argued that the District should be given more responsibility for developing strategies across the area because Circuits are struggling in some respects to find the resources needed. They saw the District's role in providing a strategic overview.

Lay leaders, such as Church Stewards, could not, in many cases, explain the role of the District, as indicated by one Property Steward: "I'd even forgotten it existed to be honest" (Church C LL2). One lay leader perceived it as nothing more than another administrative layer that holds different Circuits together. By way of illustration, one member of a congregation claimed, "I

don't think it's that relevant, frankly" (Church C MoC2). Hence, unsurprisingly, it was also felt that "the vast majority of our congregation are really vague about it" (Church C LL1).

The connection to District was hence very loose and it seemed that lay leaders and congregation members would only be aware of it if they had some personal contact. One Church Steward felt that the District had grown too large over recent years and had, in the process, lost its sense of community:

It died when the District grew large, because the District was no longer community. I don't know how much District felt a community in anything other than the District festival. We have a disconnect from it. It doesn't feel like something that speaks directly to us. (Church C LL1)

Overall, local church members could not see the Connexion with District.

3.2.5 Perceptions of Circuit

When asked about the purpose of Circuits, respondents saw the Circuit as providing advice, guidance and support, particularly with the stationing process and resourcing. Circuits were singled out for appreciation during the pandemic where their support was felt to have been hugely important to continue with services and worship. They could also use economies of scale to coordinate efforts for training and offerings to the community such as youth work and

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were there to help churches achieve their mission. One Minister saw the fundamental responsibility of the Circuit to maintain buildings and Ministers, and felt that “they’ve defined their role more as of equipping and resourcing than actually defining what the strategy should be” (Church B Min). This particular Minister felt rather sceptical about the Circuit: “I don’t think this Circuit has really helped its churches” (Church B Min). Lay leaders argued that the Circuit provided the Ministers and distributed the money to pay for them. In general, lay leaders appreciated the existence of the Circuit, in particular for guidance and advice.

Members of two larger churches felt rather detached from the Circuit. They felt that the Circuit was of not much value to their local congregations because, on some occasions, the Circuit would try to do too many things that were not necessarily experienced as relevant to the local members. Smaller and financially less strong churches, however, felt that it would be good to not be on their own and relied on the Circuit for support and guidance.

In terms of expectations, one lay leader felt that Circuit leaders should develop a strategy for the whole Circuit instead of encouraging local churches to develop their own, more or less functioning strategy. Several lay leaders felt that an overall strategy was needed to develop closer relationships with other local churches in order to achieve set objectives: “if we had an overall, an overarching strategy, then maybe we might get closer together” (Church C LL3). It was also felt by Ministers that the Circuit should enable fellowship across the churches.

In general, lay leaders and Ministers expected strong Circuit leadership which would have to come from strong national leadership. The message conveyed should be the same, also for the local churches. Ministers were very aware of the limited success of previous strategies developed by the Circuit but welcomed the recent involvement of local Ministers in Circuit leadership.

The responses received from the research participants showed that almost all lay leaders seem to have a clear sense of belonging to the Circuit, though only a few could remember, for example, the names of the superintendents. Regular members of the congregation, however, indicated that the Circuit probably did not figure on the radar that much at all. However, the online services offered by Circuits have helped increase awareness of the members and leaders of the Circuit, and were well-received.

The resulting diversity of worship was considered a privilege that many respondents welcomed because of the sense of sharing and resourcing each other.

The changing structure and increase in size of Circuits was perceived rather negatively by most respondents as they felt this contributed to a lack of identity and connectedness with other churches. One lay leader described it as follows:

We don’t seem to have a lot in common with some of the churches in the Circuit and the needs of the community will be very, very different. (Church B LL1)

Some lay leaders at Circuit level also felt that Circuits had become too big for the local community to see them as approachable resources. They understood the financial argument for larger Circuits but still challenged the ‘networking value’ of these emerging structures. One Minister argued that local churches do not speak naturally to each other and one other member of a congregation regretted the loss of a sense of identity. In effect, the connection between

local churches at Circuit level was considered rather marginal by those not engaged in wider leadership roles. One Church Steward summarised the general perception as follows:

I used to say the best thing about Methodism was the Circuit. They did so much together. Now, it is huge, and it has lost all the benefits of a Circuit. (Church B LL2)

It was also felt that Circuit leadership were not generally aware of the problems local churches confront. This prompted one lay leader to emphasise the importance of being represented at Circuit level in order to foster this sense of shared enterprise and ensure effective communication within the network. However, the same lay leader also noted that representatives do not always report back directly to the congregation, leaving the Minister once again to be the main channel of communication. Members of one other local church made much the same point, saying that the lay leader who attends Circuit meetings does not regularly feedback discussions at local level. This would only happen, if at all, through the Church Council. Another Church Steward commented:

Sometimes we’ve had Circuit representatives from our church, who I think don’t wholly represent our church. They represent their particular agenda. (Church C LL1)

The online services offered by Circuits have helped increase awareness of the members and leaders of the Circuit and were well-received.

The presence of a Circuit representative at Church Council meetings was similarly held to be important. Nevertheless, it was also recognised that regular reporting to the Church Council did not necessarily mean that recent discussions would filter down to Church members not on the Council.

All in all, the importance of the Circuit for Ministers and Circuit leadership seemed to revolve primarily around stationing and support from ministerial colleagues. The dominant point of contact with Circuit for those outside leadership roles seemed to be questions of finance and the provision of Ministers.

3.3 Effectiveness of communication

Many of these issues that reappeared in the data were provided in response to questions about the line of communication between Conference and local churches. Respondents felt that it is important to know what is discussed at Conference level because otherwise the Church at every level, nationally and locally, would simply end up going round in circles. In practice, several Church Stewards felt that communication was lost and that they needed to come together more often. One Circuit leader commented somewhat wryly that Conference seems to produce endless materials which very few people read and most congregation members regard as simply overwhelming.

We also found something of a tension around this area: on the one hand, several participants seemed quite unaware of the Conference agenda, whereas others spoke with some feeling about the 600 pages or more of Conference papers. There was a clear sense as well that most people at local level depend on Circuit Ministers to process Conference material on their behalf, with the result that some congregations felt better informed than others. Some leaders and lay leaders explained that the type and amount of information passed on depended largely on the interests and concerns of the Minister and was further filtered by perceptions around salience amongst ordinary churchgoers. As one Church Steward stated, “it very much depends on what your Minister chooses to share with you” (Church C LLI). Interestingly, some Circuit Stewards seemed to be in a position to report back as well but appeared less ready to do so. In effect, therefore, many lay leaders felt that it was down to them individually to search for information if they were personally interested in finding

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out more. We also found two Ministers who seemed to be unclear about the responsibility to share information with congregations: “Is that maybe my fault or Circuit fault that we don’t pass the information down? I don’t know” (Church B Min).

There is perhaps an issue here about the type of channels developed to disseminate information and thus facilitate involvement in discussion and decision making: some sort of compromise in terms of user-friendly digests setting out the main issues for debate. Going on from that, if Ministers did report back at local level, it tended to be to the leadership team or the Church Council and not the wider congregation. One Minister reported that there is often a break in communication as information gets filtered and amended first at District, then Circuit level. Some lay leaders, however, agreed that information needed to be channelled as not everything is always relevant at local level. One example of the break in communication: “The problem we had was nobody told us we were having an interregnum. It didn’t come out until the last minute” (Church A LLI).

Respondents reported several ways in which information about Conference decisions reached them. The Methodist Recorder seemed to be one of the main sources in the past, but several respondents said that,

the Methodist Recorder is hardly read at all now by anybody – one main channel by which people were aware, used to be aware, of what Conference was up to, I think that’s gone now. (Church D MoCI)

Another comment was that the Methodist Recorder had become too expensive and suggested that some copies should at least be made available in each local church. Other channels of communication were the Circuit Magazine, the Conference website and the local church websites. One Circuit leader explained that the Circuit website had been enormously helpful and more widely read during the pandemic than ever before. Social media, other than those used for online services, were mentioned only occasionally.

Direct personal communication seemed very important. One Circuit Steward mentioned that they saw as their responsibility to make sure Circuit information gets to the Church Council and that they would also sit on other church councils to ensure the exchange of information. Yet, this Circuit Steward also felt that they had to be proactive in getting information in terms of ploughing through local newsletters, or Circuit and

District websites. Overall, the provision of services by Conference and Circuit were well appreciated.

3.4 Current issues

A variety of issues relating to management structures were mentioned in interviews with the church members. These included care and maintenance of buildings, which often cost an enormous amount of money and energy; itinerancy; the effective use of resources; and the recruitment of volunteers. Most interviewees were aware of the precarious state of their church buildings, a concern amplified by the impact of the pandemic.

3.4.1 Main issue: Building

In line with previous findings (see Elford's report),³ the central issue for all respondents currently engaged in the Methodist Church was the maintenance and effective use of church buildings. In many cases, refurbishments have been undertaken, but in some cases, it was still felt that the facilities were "completely inadequate", for example, for effective outreach. In general, respondents argued that the buildings took up too many precious resources, and more importantly drew off time and energy from community outreach and spiritual growth. One lay leader explained:

the building shouldn't be the end. You know, they spent all their time working on how to keep the building going and then they forgot why they were there really. (Church B LL2)

In one local church, building issues had been an ongoing concern for years. It had led to splits within the congregation and difficult relationships between the Ministers and lay leaders. As never-ending debates about buildings dragged on, deeper conflicts between, and in some cases within, members had come to the surface, causing some of the parties involved to resign from office or withdraw completely because they felt frustrated and helpless. Others who had doubts about various proposals felt they were being blamed for undermining progress. Several members distanced themselves from church leaders because they felt those leaders lacked the necessary expertise to direct a building project and were not prepared to listen to concerns or seek advice.

The feeling of impasse was felt on both sides. As one Minister said, "if we could find a way of being

unshackled by the building" (Church D Min). Some Ministers felt that dealing with building issues cost precious time that could not be used for pastoral care. Nevertheless, respondents were looking for sustainable solutions in the face of declining numbers and reduced income. More positively, one lay leader provided an example of where the small congregation grew much more together, including spiritually, once the building was closed.

3.4.2 Main Issue: Itinerancy

Itinerant ministry lies close to the heart of Methodism. Similarly, Stewards and lay leaders are technically only supposed to hold office for a limited period of time (usually six years), whilst in reality, lay leaders in some churches had been in post for periods between more than 12 and 40 years! This was attributed partly to increasing difficulty in finding new volunteers to take on the role, but one Church Steward also suggested that "some people think it's for life" (Church A LL2). In other cases, some Church Stewards felt that there was a growing unwillingness amongst some regular members of the congregation to take on additional responsibility, and also a sense that incomers might lack the expertise and experience needed to take on these roles effectively. In several cases, Church Stewards said that they would like to step down after six years because they believed it was important for people to move around and share responsibilities. The work of Church Treasurer was singled out as one particular area where it is difficult to find new volunteers. Itinerancy amongst Ministers seems to be an accepted fact, even though respondents expressed mixed opinions. Some felt a real sense of loss as Ministers changed, whereas others welcomed the change and saw it as a chance to grow and take on new perspectives.

Itinerancy amongst Ministers seems to be an accepted fact, even though respondents expressed mixed opinions.

One cleric expressed unhappiness about the way they had been briefed before stationing. It was felt that little contextual information had been given about the composition of the congregation, their culture, expectations, history, systemic local problems and potential governance challenges that were inherited. That Minister felt that a better match between Minister and congregation could be achieved if there was a better preparation before stationing. They mentioned that the profiles provided by Circuit simply did not match reality and this was at best a cause for frustration, at worst a factor in subsequent resignation from that ministry. Overall, this Minister felt that the stationing process is entirely inadequate. The quality of the hand-over depended very much on whether the predecessor was available and willing to share information and

whether existing leadership groups were open and transparent. This kind of situation, it was suggested, pushed Ministers to think on their feet and “learn and develop new skills and new approaches to that context” (Church D Min).

An interesting observation was made by one respondent in relation to itinerancy, that congregations seemed almost habitually to refer to Ministers as ‘them’ as opposed to the indigenous ‘us’. The result was that Ministers and church members alike tended to take a somewhat detached view of each other. It is, of course, entirely possible to spin this observation in quite a positive direction, but it is perhaps worth noting the questions of self and social identity raised by such comments.

Two senior members of the congregation shared their experience about how relationships between Ministers and members had deteriorated over the years:

Ministers used to look upon the membership as friends, as part of a big family, whereas now we are just members and numbers, and you don’t seem to have that warmth that one used to have. (Church C MoCI)

It was also felt that Ministers, in some cases, did not like to listen to critical voices.

3.4.3 Main Issue: Effective use of resources

The interviews revealed several issues around the effective use of resources, particularly in the light of increasing pressures on both financial and human resources. A key issue was the assessment to be paid to the Circuit, especially since this is, as shown in one case, calculated purely on church numbers without taking into account the socio-economic situations of those members. Every church in this study seemed to struggle to pay their assessment. One Minister stated: “the Circuit I think has been viewed as a drain on its resources rather than something that helps it” (Church D Min).

One lay leader explained how they had been surprised when they discovered all the different levels of Methodist structures, and the way money had to be paid to each of these different layers. This, it was suggested, is a frequent source of resentment as local churches felt strongly about the need to keep the money in their local community. A real pressure point seemed to be the way assessments had to be paid from Church giving rather than through income from property.

Another lay leader did not mind giving money in principle but felt that assessments should be used for practical projects rather than more remote or even bureaucratic concerns. In the same vein, another Circuit lay leader expressed well the dilemma voiced by many other church members:

how can you turn around and say that you’re going to not have a Minister because you can’t afford them and then talk about some sort of strategy to improve the ministry within the Circuit? (CCS2)

One of the issues Ministers reported was their perceived (in)ability to lead effectively and introduce changes where necessary. One Minister who felt this particularly strongly said their members expected strong leadership and guidance: “churches are probably crying out for maybe more leadership than some of us are sometimes giving” (Church A Min). That Minister felt unable to introduce change when necessary: “I don’t really know how to do it” (Church A. Min). They felt they would not necessarily be a visionary leader and would welcome some training on

that. Other leaders seemed to be more confident, partly because they could draw on long experience of leading, including in the corporate world.

At Circuit level, one Church Steward felt unaware of how the leadership team valued the particular strengths of some of the churches in the Circuit. When asked whether and how best practice was shared between congregations, both Ministers and lay leaders admitted that this rarely happened, either because individuals did not encourage or value it or because there would be competition or jealousy between the churches. One Church Steward explained, “We don’t use their talents in other services, and other Ministers chose not to” (Church C LLI).

In one case, one Church Steward even reported finding that there was more bullying in their local church than existed in their corporate working life. One Minister strongly argued that some Ministers basically lacked the skill set needed to manage and lead projects and that it is extraordinarily difficult to find people with the requisite skills. That one Minister was the only one interviewed who set out to take the time to find out “who’s got the gifts and who hasn’t got the gifts” (Church B Min) and use these resources purposefully.

However, when asked, senior members of the congregation felt that Ministers were generally not

A real pressure point seemed to be the way assessments had to be paid from Church giving rather than through income from property.

aware of their experience and existing professional skills. Again, several Church Stewards felt that they were not listened to. Apparently, ministerial decisions were not always explained effectively, leaving lay leaders with a clear sense of frustration. One Minister summarised the situation:

a good leader of a Circuit will use all the skill sets and will value everybody's gift and contribution to that Circuit. A leader that doesn't value the contributions will suddenly find that those skill sets will suddenly disappear and they just go: it's not worth it anymore, I'm withdrawing. That's what sometimes happens. (Church B Min)

3.4.4 Main Issue: Recruitment of volunteers

The problem of finding volunteers is not uncommon across both churches of all denominations as well as the wider non-profit sector. The reasons given by respondents for the difficulties around church recruitment were interesting, however, as were the potential solutions suggested. All local churches reported problems around the difficulty of recruiting new volunteers. This had major implications for energy and enthusiasm shown by existing office holders as a number of volunteers reported that they were doing the bare minimum, whilst others felt simply overwhelmed by the workload. "The lack of volunteers is a real frustration" (Church B LL1), as one lay leader explained. Another lay leader summarised:

we have fewer Ministers and so the burden on us to take on responsibility for own arrangements services is greater than ever. (Church C LL1)

As a result, this leader explained, people had to conduct worship services without official authorisation or training, because otherwise there would be no service at all.

One Minister and a lay leader helpfully summarised the perceived reasons for the lack of volunteers: caring responsibilities of children and parents, the lack of experience or interest in active engagement, the bureaucratic hurdles in relation to paperwork, legal requirements and training and the increased expectations on volunteers, all of which left volunteers feeling daunted. As a result, one lay leader explained, "we do have a major issue in terms of longevity of positions of responsibility" (Church A LL1).

One potential solution was set out by a lay leader.

Their local church actively "sold" the benefits of engaging in volunteer work, particularly to young people with career aspirations looking for material to put on a CV. Others tried to empower and enthuse existing lay leaders so that they could inspire others to come forward. Several lay leaders suggested the reduction of workload, e.g., by introducing the aforementioned leadership teams. One Minister admitted that "it's just too big what we're inviting people to do. It is just too big" (Church A Min). A third solution was indicated by one lay leader who claimed that church roles should not be given on the basis of open competition but allocated to members chosen on the basis of ethnic and social class. Whatever the merits of such an approach, at least it presents in clear terms the potential 'elephant in the room' in terms of ethnic, social and gender bias.

3.5 Future of Methodism

It was interesting to see how the research participants saw the future of Methodism and the institutional Methodist Church. Theologically, two lay leaders felt that the Methodist Church currently fails to provide a simple and straightforward message, one that "inspires all and that should connect all" (Church D LL1). This, it was felt, would connect and energise people more rather than the institutional structures in place. In general, the researchers observed a certain sense of pessimism among all three groups around the future church. As one Circuit leader put

In general, the researchers observed a certain sense of pessimism among all three groups around the future church.

it, "there's no vision for its future, really, other than it being around long enough for me to finish my days" (Min C).

In detail, the following ideas were presented.

3.5.1 Buildings

In relation to buildings, two respondents from different churches proposed knocking down existing buildings in order to rebuild in a better location, or to move towards the kind of house church model that would actually create a closer sense of community. Other suggestions included the sharing of premises with other denominations or community groups in order to generate more income. The feeling amongst some was that the church should "bring community to people rather than expecting them to come to us" (Church C LL1). Respondents showed strongly polarised views towards the idea of merging smaller churches. While some seemed open to this, others showed strong resistance. The idea of down-

grading smaller churches from local congregation to class which was dependent on a larger church was not popular, not least for the shifting responsibilities and relationships it required. Loss of local independence and identity is likely to motivate strong feelings of resistance.

3.5.2 Use of financial and human resources

Another related issue was the effective use of financial and human resources. One lay leader adequately summarised the main concern:

Are we just satisfied to say that, okay well, we might be short of people here, but we'll struggle on and we'll see how it goes? Or do we say, fundamentally, right, we need to get together in order to use what resources we have in a much more managed and a much more effective manner. Because if you've got two churches, for example, you've got two treasurers, you've got two church council secretaries, you've got two church council meetings for every other, you know... and you double up on everything, and all you're doing is you're asking fewer people to do more things. I think there is a need for us to actually seriously contemplate a rationalization of the number of congregations that we have. But we need to do it in a way that we don't leave the local communities behind. (Church C LL3)

Church members also felt that they would more willingly contribute financially if they felt a stronger sense of 'ownership' of a Minister, now often shared between several congregations dispersed across a wide area. They also wanted 'their' Ministers to be more aware of, and use effectively, their local resources. In short, respondents wanted a far more focussed use of resources and even more standardisation, for example, when it comes to designing the websites of the local churches.

Related to the effective use of resources was the idea of getting more professional support and training for local church members. One Minister explained that they are constantly asking some very elderly and frail people to continue in demanding roles simply because of the continuing decline in active members. Further, some of the tasks lay leaders were asked to take on were beyond their capacity, often issues which in other settings would be dealt with by qualified professionals. As a result, the Minister suggested that those willing to take on such roles should at least be upskilled wherever possible,

or that some of the responsibilities should be more centralised within the Circuit. It was also suggested that local churches within one Circuit incorporating communities from radically different social, ethnic and economic backgrounds should be clustered together with similar congregations across the Circuit.

Several lay leaders also felt that training could boost confidence and prevent feelings of being overwhelmed. Basic accountancy training was one area where it was suggested that both Ministers and church officers could benefit. Lay leaders had clear expectations in terms of clerical leadership and argued that Ministers "have got to have an understanding of what's going on. They're going to become so remote" (Church A LL2).

Ideal leadership was characterised by several lay leaders as relationship-building, being inspirational and empowering, but they also felt that leadership should be a team effort. One lay leader expected the Minister to immerse themselves in relationship-building and pastoral care rather than stepping back and letting the church develop itself. Another lay leader confirmed, "People will do far more if the ministers involved. They feel more responsible" (Church B LL1). One cleric saw ideal leaders as listening and responding to the needs and concerns of the congregation, working alongside them and "giving some drive about the direction that we might we need to take" (Church A Min). Another Minister confirmed that things would be working well if the appropriate style of management and leadership would be applied.

Respondents wanted a far more focussed use of resources and...training [to] boost confidence and prevent feelings of being overwhelmed.

One cleric felt that they would benefit from the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, above all in relation to the challenges of managing volunteers. They had personally considered undertaking a management training programme or at least some modules related to the challenges of "managing" congregations. Existing clerical training, it was argued, is woefully inadequate in terms of preparation for dealing with the complexity and practicalities of life in the local church: "if you don't know how to implement your teaching and how to implement that into forming teams and forming fellowship, you go nowhere" (Church B Min). Another Minister confirmed:

We spend very little time on the styles of leadership and the styles of management. I don't see us spending a lot of time on developing expertise in leadership and management. (Min A)

One congregation member also suggested that Ministers should be trained in how to manage decline, particularly in relation to the closure of small churches. A renewed vision and the capacity to think through new ways of addressing current problems is needed. One Minister described how the Methodist Church desperately tries to stretch everything as far as possible, and suggested that instead of prolonging the agony, the Church should focus more on doing less in a rather better way.

Closely related to all this was a discussion with some Ministers about their role and workload. Lay leaders and congregation members felt that Ministers should be concentrating on their congregations and were far too involved in too many committees. Several members also yearned for greater stability and continuity in ministerial leadership so that a trusting relationship and an identity could be formed. This would present an obvious question to ongoing debates about itinerancy and length of tenure within the stationing cycle.

One Circuit leader argued that the local preacher system needs to change because, in this leader's eyes, preachers have become more and more academic and increasingly remote from the needs of the congregation. Instead, they suggested that Ministers promote local preaching teams attached to particular congregations to provide consistency in both teaching and pastoral care. Ministers and preachers should become more rooted in the church community and become "part of the life of that community" (Min C) in order to overcome the perceived disconnect between preachers and congregation. Another Minister similarly regretted the pressure to take on more responsibility for more congregations and argued that this stretching of ministerial responsibilities meant that all of these congregations lost out in terms of stable and consistent pastoral relationships.

3.5.3 Organisational structure

The adequacy of the organisational structure of the Methodist Church was discussed from various viewpoints. Circuit lay leaders felt that "we have to modernise our ministry as well modernising our systems" (CCS2). As indicated before, the role of the District has not been clear to many respondents apart from the Ministers and hence it was no surprise to hear that some questioned whether this is a necessary level of the pyramid. Comparing the current organisational structure with what John Wesley set out the Church to be, one lay leader said:

A more interactive combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches would be welcomed to get more people to buy in [to strategic conversations].

I think he'd be horrified in great big organisations like Conference and Districts. I think he'd be horrified about that because he wasn't about that. It was about the people and saving souls. (Church A LL1)

Another member of congregation confirmed:

He'd probably turn in his grave to see what's happening in the Methodist Church. We're too obsessed with processes and buildings. (Church C LL4)

Outside of formal connexional structures, successive Covid lockdowns had paradoxically fostered the feeling of Connexion between local churches at one level. Shared online services were regarded as an important step in increasing a sense of belonging to a wider network within Methodism. Nevertheless, this perceived benefit necessarily raises a number of important questions around the nature of corporate worship, inter-personal networking, and potentially passive participation.

In terms of decision-making processes, one Minister suggested that Conference should decide on one, big, five-year plan with the next five designated presidents who then work together on different targets to achieve the overarching objective. Another lay leader similarly felt there should be a stronger structure for developing a medium-to-long-term national strategy, or something similar at least at District level to develop a 'do-able' strategy with practical and measurable outcomes for Circuits.

Also, several Ministers said they would welcome the opportunity to have a greater input in these strategic conversations. A more interactive combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches would be welcomed to get more people to buy in. Some Ministers felt estranged from existing strategic conversations, and that they had little opportunity to contribute. Similarly, experienced Church Stewards felt that they did not have as much input in decision making as they used to have. The issue of empowerment was also brought up by a Church Steward who felt that they should be directly accountable to the Minister and "not being told what to do by other groups" (Church A LL2).

3.5.4 Outreach and public voice

Several respondents felt that the Methodist Church should remember its origins and actively engage in outreach activities. In particular, three lay leaders felt very strongly that there should be more community

engagement as “the church is not connecting with the community enough” (Church B LL2), with either getting more people in for non-church activities or by getting church activities into the community. It was also questioned whether church has to happen in the buildings and how to reach those who cannot come to church. One lay leader expected the church to be more open and more welcoming, yet in a different way but also to empower and encourage the congregation to be more involved in running the church.

As part of outreach, the rejuvenation of the Church was mentioned by both lay leaders and congregation members, especially by those who had had extensive involvement with the youth work in the past. As one means to achieve this greater outreach, online services were again mentioned as valued opportunities to reach a wider circle during the pandemic.

Both Ministers and lay leaders felt that more community engagement should be happening. One Minister asks:

Are we doing as much as we could be in terms of community engagement?
Probably not, you know, that's why we've talked about it a lot, because we feel guilty. (Min A)

Referring back to John Wesley, many respondents expected the Methodist Church to engage more with those on the fringes of society and being out on the streets to help those in need. One lay leader argued that you cannot expect those in need to come to you.

Going on from this, some lay leaders felt that the Methodist Church should again become a campaigning church actively engaging in politics and social issues. One Minister felt that the Church had become far too middle-class and respectable, too nice and polite about injustice: “We accommodate attitudes within the life of the church that are really unacceptable at times” (Church D Min). In their opinion, the Church had become too silent and focussed too much on managing the institution rather than ‘being’ the church. They referred back to the roots of Methodism in challenging wider society at times and working passionately for the distinctive and sometimes revolutionary values associated with the Kingdom of God. One lay leader argued that the Church needed to be brave again – to step back and see how things could be done differently.

There was also a clear expectation amongst several Ministers and lay leaders that the Methodist Church

should present a more powerful voice at the national level and speak clearly and accessibly on the major social issues the world is facing today. It was felt that Conference was too inward-looking and does not project the Methodist Church strongly enough onto the national stage. They expect Conference to be far more forthright in speaking not only about Methodism but about the basic Kingdom values which have an impact on the social, political and economic life of the wider community, especially those at the ‘bottom’ of the social scale.

3.5.5 Openness to change

When asked about how open the congregations would be to embrace the changes needed to revive the Church, one Circuit lay leader argued that they could not see any grounds for principled resistance. Yet in practice, changes happen slowly precisely because of the low energy levels reported, as well as existing power relations. In a similar vein, a Circuit leader felt that there is a tremendous amount of inertia to be overcome first, because key people in local churches do not like to let go of existing positions and power. This Circuit leader further mentioned the lack of capacity and confidence in the gospel to implement the changes needed successfully. Another Circuit leader argued that congregations were often afraid of losing their identity when pushed into ever larger ministerial groupings and/or Circuits, at the same time that many smaller churches are being required to merge with larger congregations.

At the same time, another cleric felt at a loss to know how to move forward and implement all the changes needed. Others stressed the need for caution, particularly

some senior members of congregation who had lived through previous changes, especially in terms of District and Circuit structures; not only had this ‘depersonalised’ many of the structural relationships and undermined existing networks and relationships but led to the loss of valuable experience that had been built within the established structures.

Some long-standing members of the Methodist church expressed singular dissatisfaction with certain decisions made in recent years, in particular regarding the youth work. One Circuit lay leader said:

I'm certainly disheartened by what's happened within the Methodist Church over my lifetime and I will be one of those, you know, considering my future in the Methodist Church, if one or two decisions come down from Connexion that I can't live which I'm not happy with. (CCS2)

Referring back to John Wesley, many respondents expected the Methodist Church to engage more with those on the fringes of society.

Another issue mentioned in this regard was the decision to allow certain forms of gambling in Methodist premises and the gradual easing of rules on the use of alcohol. Given this regard for the 'historic witness' of Methodism on such changes in social policy, the overwhelming majority of respondents, perhaps surprisingly, seemed strongly in favour of the recent decision to move forward cautiously in terms of same-sex marriage. There was clear dissent from this decision in some churches, with some strong views courteously but firmly put forward; but the general consensus amongst most of our participants that this change was welcomed and long overdue.

Having said all of that, at least one senior Circuit leader felt that, in general, the Methodist Conference is actually quite good at initiating change and is constantly adapting and modifying rules and processes to work more effectively. This tended to be a relatively unusual point of view, however; a more common perception was that Conference is somewhat remote from local church concerns.

In practice, changes happen slowly precisely because of the low energy levels reported, as well as existing power relations.

4 Concluding remarks and recommendations

This report has summarised the findings of a pilot study on awareness of connexional and management structures across the Methodist Church in the UK and identified some current main issues raised by participants, together with suggestions for ways forward. We support the point made in Elford's report, that change is necessary in the Methodist Church because of the impact of far-reaching changes in the secular mindset.⁴ These shifts in social expectations and perceptions suggest that an enormous effort is required to adapt in response, and we found that often local congregations lack the energy, willingness and ability to implement such changes.

We also found that leaders often feel ill-prepared to think strategically, promote change and move things forward, mostly because of what they see as a lack of ownership and experience. In one sense, the commitment of Methodism to Connexionalism provides an obvious opportunity for sharing good practice, experience and expertise, but the evidence of this study is that this is experienced by many Methodists as a somewhat distant overarching principle that does not have much practical impact at the local level. This is largely down to a perception, rightly or wrongly, of a sense of distance,

ironically promoted by the increasing size of Circuits and Districts, which is felt to be driven mainly by economies of scale yet undermines local decision making as well as personal relationships and a sense of belonging. This seems to invite reflection at all levels of the institutional organisation. Having said that, however, the rise of the online services presents a number of opportunities for reviving awareness of Connexionalism across local congregations. Perhaps there is also an opportunity for work to be undertaken at some point to strengthen awareness of the foundational importance of Connexion in Methodism thinking at both the historical and theological levels.

One other key finding is that Ministers are clearly identified as the chief intermediaries between Conference and local congregations and currently have the primary role in disseminating Conference discussions. Expectations placed on Ministers have also been explored and highlighted the need to achieve a better match between leader and follower expectations, both of which seem to have been shaped largely by secular experience and understanding. The role of Ministers as leaders needs to be considered much more fully from both from managerial and (critical) theological perspectives. It is clear that many Ministers feel a need to be better equipped as leaders; but less clear is the implied model of leadership operating behind many of these comments. Training has been identified as being vital for both leaders and lay leaders. So far, clerical training is reckoned to have been largely focused on academic engagement rather than the practical theological skills needed for prayerful management and leadership.

Previous attempts to restructure the Methodist Church at Circuit and District level have perhaps resulted in resource benefits but have clearly had a major impact on a sense of Connexional and corporate identity. Our study has also identified a yearning for ministerial continuity and stability in a world that has become increasingly complex and fast-paced, but we also note the implications of this yearning for stability on the established pattern of stationing.

One of the main problems around the current Methodist Church seems to be a degree of denial at local level around the radical challenges of structural decline coupled with a certain unwillingness to compromise. Methodists need to be less afraid of speaking the truth in love. The overall question is whether the Methodist Church wants to continue to manage decline (and if it does, it needs to prepare adequately for it) or try to revive the Church with a focussed but bold approach, an effective use of

resources and active involvement of local Ministers as mediators. For local churches, the main objective seems to be,

to actually find a way of making the best use of the people and the resources we've got, in order to provide a service in the community and to actually maintain our worship life. (Church C LL3)

This report revealed a number of issues which could be explored in greater depth through further research by either applying a larger-scale survey or in-depth case studies. These issues relate, for example, to the desire for stability and continuity of the congregation, and the involvement of local Ministers in decision making.

In terms of practical recommendations, we propose the following, but acknowledge that these were derived from a limited sample size and thus reflect a response to the specific perceptions reported in this study:

- a. Cluster similar local churches within a Circuit to encourage the effective use of resources and the development of an identity that goes beyond the local church.
- b. Reconsider the assessment calculation: not based on numbers but on the socioeconomic situation of the local church.
- c. Prepare Ministers in stationing process more adequately to achieve a better match in expectations, organise a proper hand-over.
- d. Develop adequate training programmes for lay leaders, organise professional help or merge responsibilities across similar churches.
- e. Develop adequate training programmes for Ministers (mainly in terms of leadership and management questions, e.g., around motivation; engagement and management of congregation and volunteers; conflict management and management of decline; strengthen confidence and competence of Ministers to embrace change).
- f. Strengthen the role of Ministers as intermediaries within the wider Methodist structure, by which then communication with the entire congregation is enhanced.
- g. Reconsider communication channels and tools in order to reach the wider congregation.
- h. Enable Ministers to feel a stronger identity with their local churches by providing more conti-

nuity and stability.

- i. Through the continued provision of online services, develop a stronger sense of Connexion so that congregations of smaller churches open up to join other churches in case of closure.
- j. Increase awareness of the role of the different institutional layers and make decision making process more transparent, allow other voices to be heard.

5 Theological Reflections

A number of the themes emerging from these interviews invite a degree of theological reflection – a conversation, as it were, between the topics raised by participants and the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' of scripture, tradition, reason and experience:

- a. Connexion – the role of networking and mutual interdependence between Methodist congregations within Circuits and across wider denominational structures such as the District and Conference
- b. The perceived and *de facto* leadership role of Ministers within the contemporary Methodist Church
- c. Finance and the impact of declining membership on resources available to support the work of the Methodist Church
- d. Shifting patterns of power relations within the Methodist Church
- e. The impact of social change on membership and relationships with the wider secular culture
- f. Concerns about evangelism and social action in the local community
- g. An apparent growth in congregationalism as one outcome of these combined changes
- h. The importance of buildings both in practical terms (as potential sources of income) and significant symbols of social identity (this is 'the place where we feel at home')

In fact, it might be suggested that there are, perhaps, two or three connecting threads running through of these themes, so that theological reflection could usefully be focused on a dialogue between three related issues running through the interviews and scripture.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul sets out:

- a. A distinctive set of values and practices which set the Christian community apart from the 'normal' expectations and practices of the wider community – 1 Cor.1-11
 - i. The 'foolishness of God'
 - ii. The example of sacrificial self-giving
 - iii. Discussion of the way emerging Christian ethical values and practices interact (and apparently clash at times) with the values and practices of pagan society
 - iv. The symbolism of ritual practices within the Christian community (especially the Lord's Supper)
- b. A call to review 'connected-ness' within a community which appears to be split between competing factions – the concept of the 'body of Christ' in 1 Cor 12-14
- c. Reflection on the combined effect of both these themes on power relationships within the Christian community

Of these three steps in Paul's discussion, it is perhaps the 'body of Christ' imagery which lends itself most obviously to the cluster of issues discussed by participants about Connexion, the role of Ministers, congregationalism, and even finance, given that the annual Circuit Assessment was raised on quite a few occasions as one of the key concerns in a time when local income from membership seems to be declining, and the provision of ordained Ministers is becoming more stretched.

In 1 Cor 12, Paul uses a well-known rhetorical trope to construct a complex rhetorical argument, to drive home his view of the Church as indispensably and inescapably connected, at both a local level and in terms of a wider Church network. Here, surely, is the starting point for any review of the importance of Connexion within the Methodist Church, though whether this translates itself easily to the current structures at national, District and Circuit levels is a point which needs more careful consideration. As several participants suggested, the existing connexional framework emerged out of different circumstances in different generations, and one of the areas which may need to be reviewed is faithfulness to this tradition of shared and networked support in a digital age where social expectations and practices are significantly different from

even more recent generations.

Paul then goes on to argue that spiritual gifted-ness within the Church is less about 'flashy' spiritual activities such as speaking in tongues and rather more about building up the wellbeing of the entire community. In this capacity, there is a real sense for Paul of 'every member ministry', in which even those who seem gifted with less glamorous roles play an indispensable part in the life of the Church. Those who see themselves as a kind of spiritual elite, blazing a trail in a competitive environment to show how superior they are to the 'lesser' members, are in fact undermining the corporate nature of inter-connected relationships within the body. Paul has thus subverted the normal form of his borrowed secular trope, which was characteristically used to persuade the 'lesser' social orders to submit to a hierarchical order acknowledging their dependence on social 'superiors'. But pointing to the 'foolishness of the cross', Paul inverts this structure (at least partially), to argue that the 'weaker' and more 'unseemly' members should in fact receive greater honour from the body as a whole.

This is only a partial inversion, of course, because famously Paul starts to generate a list of functions in 1 Cor 12:28 which seems to pull back from egalitarian principles and reassert a priority of order built around 'first, apostles, second prophets, and third teachers'. Arguments between NT scholars continue unabated about the significance of this list, but it does at least caution against jumping to oversimplified egalitarian ideals too readily. But it is perhaps within this matrix of competing ideals that the comments generated for this study about the role of Ministers may perhaps need to be placed. So too, perhaps, some of the comments about shifting power relations between Stewards at both Circuit and congregational levels and Ministers – and indeed comments about the stationing process and the expected length of stay between ministerial appointments.

There are some complex questions to be considered here, both at a theological and organisational level, but this is at least one area which might be usefully explored in greater theological detail.

If the 'creeping congregationalism' emerging from our data, together with serious practical and theological questions about financial resources, can be linked together with this cluster of themes around the notion of the 'body of Christ', then they can also, perhaps, be linked to that other major theme around the symbolism and significance of local church buildings. It was quite clear in much of the partici-

It is perhaps the 'body of Christ' imagery which lends itself most obviously to the cluster of issues discussed by participants.

part data that for both local Stewards and 'ordinary' Church members, local churches played a hugely symbolic role in defining what it means to be part of a local congregation. A full range of responses could be detected, from those who took a radical stance and argued that church buildings should be sold off to free up scarce financial resources for outreach to the community, through to fierce resistance from some (often, but not exclusively, more elderly members) to any form of proposed change: for these participants, the local building was the Church. Here is rich material for reflection, perhaps, not just on the notion of the 'body of Christ' but Paul's other (mixed) metaphor in 1 Cor 3:10-17 about buildings and the church as 'the temple of God'.

All of this comes to a sharp focus in the discussions we heard about proposed reordering of premises, letting out of buildings to raise rental income, and concerns about preserving the treasured histories of these places. At the very least, therefore, there are some huge pastoral issues here about respect for heritage and memory, mission priorities in the local community, and the management of change. All of this – and much more – needs to be relocated in the more theoretical discussion of 'inverted Christian values' that Paul sets out in 1 Cor 1-4. Christians, says Paul, see things differently: what is seen in secular terms as perfectly ordinary common sense is in fact challenged by God's wisdom, where death is life. The missiological implications of this basic principle, it could be argued, have been missed by the entire Church in the west, and certainly not just Methodism in isolation. But it could be argued that the Wesleyan heritage of 'stepping outside the box' if necessary, in order to promote the growth of God's kingdom should at least give Methodism a head start in this respect: if access to buildings becomes a problem, then go out into the hedgerows and fields – or at least the 21st century equivalent!

Much more on all of this really needs to be said, but at the very least, reflection on these amazingly rich interviews invites much more substantial theological reflection. Perhaps what is needed above all is a renewed sense of vision and purpose to re-energise the sense of near-terminal decline we encountered in many of the interviews. But Paul, of course, is equally clear that such a renewal of vision is essentially God's business, not something which can be artificially generated at a human level. Which perhaps brings us back to the fourth leg in the Wesleyan theological stool, experience – the need for all theological reflection to be rooted first and foremost in prayer and worship.

Endnotes

1. This research project was funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation.
2. Elford, K. (2022) Change, the Gospel and Methodist identity: an account of recent Methodist thinking, an essay in support of the Susanna Wesley Foundation Research project: Changing Church.
3. Elford (2022).
4. Elford (2022).