

## **Has the Stationing of Methodist Presbyters within Circuits become a Legal Fiction?<sup>1</sup>**

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In this paper I want to explore some of the theoretical and theological underpinning, the practical reality and the creative possibilities surrounding the contemporary stationing of presbyters<sup>2</sup> in the Methodist Church of Great Britain. It is my contention that not only is the normative notion that presbyters are stationed by the decision of the Methodist Conference to serve in particular circuits<sup>3</sup> an inaccurate description of the lived reality, but such dissonance is also potentially detrimental to the future health and mission of the Methodist Church. I concur with Gary Badcock: 'an ecclesiology that cannot show its relevance to the actual life of the church is of questionable value'.<sup>4</sup>

I come to this paper having completed a doctorate in the role of the Superintendent Minister in British Methodism.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, I served the Connexional Team as the District Development Enabler for the Newcastle upon

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<sup>1</sup> An initial version of this paper was presented at the Inaugural Methodist Research Conference, Methodist Studies Seminar held in Durham at the Wesley Study Centre of Durham University 27 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The presbyter is one of the two forms of ordained minister in British Methodism, the other being the deacon. See Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, 'What is a Presbyter?', in Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2002*, 446-54, (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The distinctive Methodist name for the formal grouping of local Methodist churches which began as early as 1746 arose from the practice of 'Mr Wesley's Preachers' riding round to each Methodist 'society' in a regular circuit, to which they were sent to serve by John Wesley. See John A. Vickers (ed.) 'Documents and Source Material', in Rupert Davies *et al.* (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. IV, 3-649 (London: Epworth Press, 1988), 86. For the purpose and constitution of circuits, see Methodist Church, 'Book III Standing Orders' in *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of The Methodist Church*, Volume 2, 261-744 (London: Methodist Publishing, 2017), Part 5 ['Standing Orders' are found here in 'CPD']. The Conference, the governing body of the Methodist Church, still determines on an annual basis where its ministers will be stationed: see Methodist Church 'Stations of the Presbyters and Deacons' in *The Minutes of the Annual Conference and Directory 2017* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2017), pp.84-142.

<sup>4</sup> Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Cambridge UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Neil Cockling, 'Watching Over one another in Love: Methodist Superintendents and Oversight in the Church' (Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2015).

Tyne District with the brief of helping the district and its circuits to think about their deployment of ministers in the fulfilment of the Church's mission.<sup>6</sup> As a member of the district's Stationing Advisory Group, I continue to offer advice concerning prioritisation of presbyteral appointments.

The focus of this paper is on the deployment of presbyters by the Methodist Conference. It is not about the nature or future of the Methodist circuit.<sup>7</sup> Nor do I seek here to critique the release of presbyters to serve in non-circuit appointments, which the Conference acknowledges to be 'theologically justifiable' since 'the Church is as much the Church when it is dispersed in the world as when it is gathered in fellowship',<sup>8</sup> and I exclude such use of presbyters from my considerations. Nor is this paper a defence of the missional role of the presbyter as opposed to the missional role exercised by any other individual (including deacons) within the ministry of the whole people of God.<sup>9</sup> Nor in considering staff deployment do I undertake to critique the way that circuits have, since the 1970s, supplemented ordained ministry with lay employees.<sup>10</sup>

My underlying question is simply this: if Methodist presbyters are one part of the 'body of ministers who enter a covenant relationship with the Conference' and 'the Conference is committed to deploying them all appropriately',<sup>11</sup> what is the *lived practice* of that deployment? And how might that practice be modified to be most fruitful for the Kingdom?

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<sup>6</sup> Methodist Church, 'Resourcing the Districts: District Development Enablers', in *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2012*, by Methodist Church, 300-3 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2012). I served as the District Development Enabler (DDE) from 2009-2012. The DDEs were introduced in response to the paper of the then General Secretary, David Deeks, 'Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission' in Methodist Church, *Methodist Council Papers 31 October - 1 November 2006*, MC/06/103 (London: Methodist Church, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> A discussion about the nature and future place of Methodist circuits needs to continue to take place, but I proceed on the basis that the case has not yet been made to abandon circuits as a unit of mission. See Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, 'The Missional Nature of the Circuit', in Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2008*, 98-108 (London: The Methodist Conference Office, 2008), which I and Gareth J. Powell drafted for the Committee. A useful summary of the current and suggested areas of discussion at a connexional level may be found in the 2015 Methodist Council Paper MC/15/96: Stephen Skuce, 'NOM/2015/204: Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission. Suggested Research for the Council to Consider', in Methodist Church, *Methodist Council Papers 12-13 October 2015* (2015), MC15-96.

<sup>8</sup> Methodist Church, '44. Releasing Ministers for Ministry' (2002) <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-releasing-ministers-for-ministry-2002.pdf> (28 October 2017), para. 3.3. I note here that as a Consultant Lead Chaplain in the National Health Service, I am also one of those presbyters currently stationed by the Conference to serve in an appointment outside the control of the Methodist Church.

<sup>9</sup> See Faith and Order Committee, 'What is a Presbyter?', 446-54, but especially para.7. For a discussion on the mutual interdependency of ordained and lay ministries in the Methodist Church see Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, 'The Ministry of the People of God (1988)', in *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume Two 1984-2000*, 229-281 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For a historical review, see Methodist Church, 'Lay Workers' Terms and Conditions' in Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2006*, 171-79 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2006), pp.171-72.

<sup>11</sup> Methodist Church, 'What is a Presbyter?', para. 9.

I will present three contentions:

Firstly, that although the normative understanding of the Methodist Church is that presbyters are stationed in and appointed to circuits, they no longer function as *circuit* presbyters, and in reality are appointed by the Methodist Conference to *local churches* in a way that tends towards *congregationalism*.

Secondly, the normative understanding and theological ideal of the Conference that presbyters exercise *collegial oversight* of the churches in the circuit is no longer the case in practice – not least because of the decisions of the Conference itself.

Thirdly, that if the circuit is no longer the *de facto* unit of stationing, and if, as a connexional<sup>12</sup> church, the Methodist Church wishes to transcend self-sufficient congregationalism then the *district*<sup>13</sup> should become the appropriate base of appointment for presbyters. Indeed, I will argue that that is the implied intention of existing decisions of the Conference. I will also argue that the Conference therefore needs to determine the appropriate number of presbyters for each district. Each district could then deploy its allocated presbyters in accordance with local mission potential.

### Congregationalism

Although the primary local stationing of a presbyter is ostensibly to the circuit, not to a particular local church or churches,<sup>14</sup> in actual practice presbyters only serve a ‘section’ of the circuit – the congregation(s) of which they have pastoral charge. The Faith and Order Committee noted in 1986 that

informal evidence suggests that in many circuits ministers have become increasingly confined to the section of their circuit where they have pastoral charge, and decreasingly ‘circuit-conscious’.<sup>15</sup>

Thirteen years later, Methodist historian Martin Wellings described:

an insidious creeping congregationalism. Small churches with energy only for maintenance and large churches safe in their self-sufficiency pay scant heed to

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of the ‘connexion’ describes the network of local churches, circuits, districts and the Conference, united together in common discipline and oversight, which comprise the Methodist Church. As in Paul’s image of the Body of Christ (ICor.12.12-26), all parts are interdependent. See Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, ‘Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice’, in Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 1999*, 157-215 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), section 4.6.

<sup>13</sup> The district is a grouping of circuits; there are thirty British districts.

<sup>14</sup> Standing Order 780(1)(i).

<sup>15</sup> Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, ‘The Ministry of the People of God (1986)’, in *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Volume Two 1984-2000*, pp.195-228 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2000), para. 009(c).

the tradition of mutual responsibility and accountability, and do little to foster a wider vision.<sup>16</sup>

Angela Shier-Jones updated Wellings' analysis ten years later:

this creeping congregationalism ... can no longer be described as creeping. ... There is some evidence to suggest ... that churches and ministers alike are increasingly choosing to become as disconnected as possible from a Connexion that seems less and less relevant to the concerns and work of the local church.<sup>17</sup>

Specific evidence of congregationalist independence from the circuit of both churches and ministers was presented in 2012 by Stephen Maunder.<sup>18</sup> If congregationalist tendencies have become established practice in 'inherited church', then they are all the more compounded in 'fresh expressions' of church.<sup>19</sup> Fresh expressions often see little connection with other churches, or presbyters, in the circuit.<sup>20</sup> Joanne Cox points to extreme behaviour when she describes presbyters 'intentionally sabotaging their relationship within the circuit in order to protect and preserve their communities'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, local church diversity prevents some circuit-wide policies from being suggested or implemented, belying the notion that the circuit is a missional unit for the Methodist Church.

In my own research, I have found that presbyters find it difficult to maintain intra-circuit connexionalism and communication within all but the smallest circuits – a problem which becomes pressing as circuits increase in size.<sup>22</sup> Of all the presbyters, only the lead presbyter, the superintendent, generally has a circuit-wide role.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Wellings, 'A time to be born and a time to die?': a historian's perspective on the future of Methodism', in Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (eds.), *Methodism and the Future*, 148-157 (London: Cassell, 1999), 156. Congregationalist tendencies are also noted by Clive Marsh, 'The Practice of Theology in British Methodism', *Epworth Review* 28 no. 3 (2001), pp.36-44, at p.38.

<sup>17</sup> Angela Shier-Jones, 'Growth in Grace and Holiness', in Luke Curran and Angela Shier-Jones (eds.) *Methodist Present Potential, And realistic hopes for the future*, 186-202 (London: Epworth, 2009), pp. 196-97.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen J. Maunder, 'How oversight is understood and exercised by Methodist Circuit Superintendent Ministers within the South East District of the Methodist Church.' Paper presented at *A Learning Church Conference, Birmingham, 14 June 2012* (London: The Methodist Church Connexional Team, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> For the distinction, see section 1.1 of Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012), pp.1-3.

<sup>20</sup> Congregationalist tendencies have a long history: a defence of connexionalism against congregationalism in the historical American context may be found in Z.K. Hawley, *Congregationalism and Methodism* (New York: Leavitt, Trow and Company, 1846), especially 162-71. For the recent British context of fresh expressions see Joanne Heather Cox, 'Challenging Leadership: Mission-Shaped Presbyters in Methodist Fresh Expressions' (Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2012), especially 234-42. The Methodist Council itself accepted an approach to fresh expressions which was not based on circuits: Graham Horsley *et al.*, 'Connexional Fresh Expressions Scheme', in Methodist Church, *Methodist Council Papers, 15-16 October 2007* (2007), MC/07/77.

<sup>21</sup> Cox, 'Challenging Leadership', pp.235.

<sup>22</sup> Between 2009 and 2014 there was a 26 per cent reduction in the number of circuits. See Cockling, *Watching Over one another in Love*, pp.153-55.

In fact, it is the *lay* staff members who are more likely to be deployed across the circuit. Circuit youth workers and circuit family workers may well work *across* different sections, whereas the presbyters themselves work sectionally. Equally, the unpaid preachers – the Local Preachers – may well preach throughout the circuit, leaving the presbyters to concentrate on their ‘own’ churches. This is a complete reversal of the original practice – where worship was led by ‘Local’ preachers while Mr. Wesley’s preachers travelled the circuit.<sup>23</sup> It also contradicts the normative view that ‘In the various places to which they are sent presbyters are primarily accountable to the Conference and secondarily to the local people in their particular context.’<sup>24</sup>

Presbyters are planned to lead worship mainly – and sometimes entirely – in their own sections.<sup>25</sup> Even superintendents do not preach around the whole circuit as much as in their own section. I found in my own research that one in three superintendents (36%) rarely or never preach outside their own section on a Sunday morning, making it impossible to visit some other congregations to lead their worship. Indeed, they are often welcomed as ‘visiting preachers’. This is not surprising given the practice of presbyters offering the superintendent a completed plan of their own appointments, including the times when the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper will be celebrated by themselves in their own churches, leaving the superintendent to simply fill the gaps (if possible) with Local Preachers and the few appointments offered elsewhere by presbyteral colleagues.

Arguably, one of the factors lying behind the move to people focusing on the leadership of their local minister (rather than the leadership of the superintendent or the collegial leadership of circuit colleagues) is that they want to know that the leader ‘belongs’ to them, and that they can participate in the leadership of the church because they know and are known by their minister. Perhaps there is a subliminal emphasis on an incarnational approach here – as Jesus reveals the Father to his ‘friends’, familiarity and friendship allows a greater impartation of knowledge than that between relative strangers (John 15.15). Congregations scrutinise strangers in their pulpit, whereas familiar voices may be truly heard.<sup>26</sup> One circuit in the Newcastle upon Tyne District experimented with team ministry of all the ministers across all the circuit but the team approach ceased on the appointment of a new superintendent because the churches did not know who ‘their’ minister was, and the ministers wanted more frequent contact with the congregations to which they were preaching.

So I contend that the evidence is irrefutable: the normative concept that presbyters belong to whole circuits is now no longer reflected in practice. The end-

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<sup>23</sup> The 1747 conference distinguished between the twenty-three ‘travelling preachers’ and the thirty-eight men who ‘assist us in only one place’. See a discussion in Frank Baker ‘The People Called Methodists 3. Polity’, in Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (eds.) *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 211-55 (London: Epworth Press, 1965), pp.236-238.

<sup>24</sup> Methodist Church, ‘What is a Presbyter?’, para.7

<sup>25</sup> The ‘circuit preaching plan’, a rota showing who is preaching at which Local Church at which service, is usually published quarterly.

<sup>26</sup> Congregations can appreciate the familiarity of small teams of preachers who may offer as much consistency in preaching style as can an *individual* preacher.

point could well be an adoption of a circuit as a unit of stationing for those cases where local churches are too small to pay for a whole minister themselves and need to join with other churches – as is the case in the United Methodist Church.<sup>27</sup>

### Diminished Collegial Oversight

My second contention is related to the first. Partly as a consequence of the myopia of congregationalism, collegial oversight of the circuit's churches is no longer being exercised by the presbyters.

When the report *The Nature of Oversight* was presented to the 2006 Conference, perhaps one reason why it was not adopted by the Conference was that it states that

Presbyters who are appointed to exercise pastoral charge in a circuit are appointed by the Conference to do so collectively across the whole circuit. They are not appointed to have charge of or be a servant to particular churches in the circuit.<sup>28</sup>

Yet in my doctoral research I found evidence that people do not expect presbyters to think about the circuit as a whole – that task is left to the superintendent. Shared *episkopé* at staff and Circuit Leadership Team meetings concerns discussion about the life of the *circuit* rather than its individual churches. Collegial *episkopé* is offered over local churches primarily through delegation to the local presbyter. The presbyters' task is to serve only their own churches. They do not exercise oversight or leadership in any other churches in the circuit. Even within sections, local churches resent their minister not being available for them when the minister has duties in another of his or her churches.

Although particular problematic churches may be discussed on an *ad hoc* basis in the circuit staff meeting, there is generally no systematic approach to corporate pastoral care of the local churches of the circuit in an act of collegial oversight.

People argue that ministers should look after their own patch. The superintendent must guard against 'treading on the toes of the minister on the ground'. Superintendents I interviewed for my doctoral research did not want to 'meddle in the internal doings of churches' where they have their 'own minister'. People view superintendents as overseeing *staff* rather than *churches*. Only one in

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<sup>27</sup> When the (American) United Methodist Church was formed in 1968, the term 'circuit' was a residual, optional term describing 'a pastoral charge of two or more churches' (United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 1968* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Church Publishing House, 1968), 68) but the term 'cooperative parish' is now used as an alternative to 'circuit' (*The Book of Discipline 2016*, ¶205(2)). Churches are *permitted* to form cooperative parishes; the nearest equivalent to a British circuit is the 'Multiple Charge Parish' with a 'director or co-ordinator .. appointed or assigned by the bishop' (¶206 (3)(b)(1)).

<sup>28</sup> Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, 'The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain', in Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2005*, 60-123 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2005), para. 3.3. See also Standing Order 700.

four people I interviewed saw the superintendent as co-ordinator or overseer of the circuit's work. There was no significant evidence that superintendents' authority to intervene in the local church was recognised by their colleagues. One superintendent said: 'It's not my job to tell people how to do their ministry or run their churches – it's just my job to run the circuit.' Although Standing Order 522(1) expects formal visitation of the local churches by the superintendent, this practice is, based on my research, apparently non-existent. Superintendents themselves give more energy to the churches where they themselves have pastoral charge.

Colleagues are not expected in ordinary circumstances to exercise any ministry in another presbyter's local church; indeed, any notional authority of the superintendent has no day-to-day impact on colleagues (except in extreme cases of disciplinary problems). Their impact on *other* local churches depended on their ability to inspire and empower colleagues.

Yet this diminution of collegial oversight has happened as a result of the Conference's *own* decisions. I believe five decisions are at issue:

- (1) The Conference deemed that there were too many superintendents required and circuit staff teams were too small and inflexible. Circuits therefore were amalgamated in order to reduce the number of superintendencies, but also to utilise the benefits of scale: a larger staff offers flexibility in deployment and specialisation.<sup>29</sup> But large circuits covering hundreds of square miles with many chapels and a coach-load of staff have difficulties in thinking of the circuit as a unit of mission. Sectionalisation is inevitable – at the very least, travel costs need to be minimized, so 140-mile round trips to preach are not feasible. A circuit meeting which takes place more than an hour's drive away becomes a less attractive way to spend an evening! Furthermore, members of such meetings are asked to vote on the re-invitation of presbyters who have rarely visited their churches, if at all. Local churches who have either loved or loathed their ministers have found that they have little influence in a large circuit meeting, most of whose members have little personal knowledge of that presbyter.
- (2) As a result of increased circuit size, and the Charity Commission querying the number of trustees forming the Church Councils, the 2013 Conference removed the right of circuit ministers to a seat on every Church Council in the circuit, thus diminishing their area of involvement in governance and reducing their need to engage with these churches.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Skuce, Stephen *et al.*, 'Research Response to NoM 2015/204 Impact of Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission' in Methodist Church, *Methodist Council Papers 2-4 April 2016* (2016), MC 16/37. The reorganisation resulted from the Conference's response to Deeks, *Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission*, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2005* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2005), p.510. The average number of ministers in a circuit is four; only three are permitted on a church council: Standing Order 610(4)(i).

- (3) Before the connexional reorganisation of the mid-1990s, which included the removal of most prescribed agendas from *CPD*, the connexional 'divisions' asked for each circuit to appoint a minister to represent their interests.<sup>31</sup> Each minister thus had a 'circuit portfolio' such as 'Youth' or 'Ministries'. However, roughly quadrennial connexional reorganisation means that no circuits I studied for my doctoral research now continued a portfolio approach. This leaves the superintendent alone to have a circuit-wide role.
- (4) The Stationing Committee expects profiles of prospective appointments to indicate of which churches a prospective presbyter will have pastoral charge. Although the Circuit Meeting in theory has the prerogative to alter pastoral charge of its churches, it is not difficult to imagine the reaction of a Chair of District who has fought hard to fill a particular appointment at the Stationing Committee if the circuit were to immediately change the arrangements and ask the presbyter to look after a different set of churches.<sup>32</sup>
- (5) Not all local ministers are overseen by their presbyteral colleagues. New pioneer ministers in 'Venture FX' operate at the invitation of the circuit, but with an oversight and accountability which lie not with the Circuit Meeting and with a London-based Connexional Team-member.<sup>33</sup> Thus for these new churches it is *expected* that there will be no collegial oversight by the circuit staff.

I contend that if collegial oversight is no longer being exercised over the circuit as a whole, it begs the question as to why circuits should determine the deployment of presbyters. What seems to be happening in practice is that a focus on local churches, and a concomitant lack of overview of the wider area and mission of the circuit, means that neither individual presbyters, nor circuit staff teams as a whole, are able to think about those places where no churches currently exist. Only what is seen is accepted: strategic imagination of what might be is rarely considered. Perhaps the talents of the church are being buried in the ground, in the backyard of existing

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<sup>31</sup> The changes were proposed in General Purposes Committee of the Methodist Church, 'Local Church and Circuit Constitutions', in Methodist Church, *Agenda of the Methodist Conference 1992*, pp.678-94 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1992), especially paragraph 19. The standard agendas were found in *CPD* in Part 10 of the Standing Orders in editions prior to 1993.

<sup>32</sup> In the case of a probationer it is to be expected that the appointment would not be varied by the Circuit Meeting until ordination occurs. The section or church as the basis for stationing was formally recognised for many years by a more localised place-name being placed in brackets after a minister's name. The purpose of this place or church name was for the Conference to restrict the pastoral charge of a minister within a circuit – in other words, the Circuit Meeting could not change that pastoral charge without reference to the Conference. The *Minutes of Conference* listed these places separately. There is still a list of such names, but it is residual and bears no relevance to the current list of stations (Methodist Church, *Minutes 2017*, pp.463-476.) It merely helps locate old circuit names within new circuits.

<sup>33</sup> Horsley *et al.*, 'Connexional Fresh Expressions Scheme'. See also Methodist Church, 'Venture FX', <http://www.methodist.org.uk/venturefx> (28 October 2017).



congregations (Matt. 25.14-30), instead of being taken to the speculative and bustling markets of the mission field.

### A way forward?

Thirdly, in response, I want to argue for a new locus of stationing. *Called to Love and Praise* states that there is mutuality and dependency of local churches within circuits.<sup>34</sup> If as a connexional church, the Methodist Church wishes to transcend congregationalism, and also to offer wider oversight of the work of local churches, and if the circuit for various reasons is failing to provide for this, then I contend that the *district* should become the appropriate base of appointment for presbyters.

Indeed, that is the implied intention of existing decisions of the Conference.

As Jesus commissioned his apostles to go into the world (Matt. 28.19-20), presbyters are commissioned and sent by the Conference when the Conference determines those places where they will represent the Conference for the ensuing year.

Presbyters represent the Conference in continuation of the way that the early itinerant preachers represented John Wesley. Jerome (*Commentary on Galatians I:1*) argued that the office of apostle derives from the *shaliach*, a personal representative who can speak in the name of his principal and act as plenipotentiary. His authority was delegated and lasted only as long as his mandate, but was not merely task-specific. The *shelihim* of the Great Sanhedrin were sent as messengers and as collectors of subscriptions from the Diaspora. The Pastoral Epistles and 1 Clement evidence the post-apostolic continuation of the office of *shaliach*.<sup>35</sup>

But if, like the *shelihim* of the Great Sanhedrin, the normative belief is that the Conference stations its representatives, where does the decision for stationing *actually* take place in practice? One might at first answer that stationing takes place at the Conference when by standing vote the Stations for the ensuing year are adopted by the Conference.

Yet the decisions about stationing on which the Conference votes are actually made by the Stationing Committee and by the Stationing Action Group [SAG] – which prepare the First Draft of the Stations to the Conference and advise during the last-minute ‘horse-trading’ which might take place actually at the Conference.<sup>36</sup> The decisions of the Stationing Committee and the SAG are made on the basis of job profiles prepared by the circuits.<sup>37</sup> Circuit Meetings usually delegate the preparation of job profiles to the Circuit Leadership Team or an Invitation Committee. But before any job profile can be prepared, the Circuit Meeting determines how many ministers it can afford to support. So although the Conference appoints ministers to the stations, the decision actually begins at the Circuit Finance Committee or its

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<sup>34</sup> Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, ‘Called to Love and Praise’, para. 4.6.2.

<sup>35</sup> A.M. Farrer, ‘Foreword’, in K.E. Kirk *et al.*, *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and the Doctrine of Episcopacy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., v-xviii (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1957), vii-viii; Gregory Dix, ‘The Ministry in the Early Church’, *ibid.*, pp.183-303, at 229, 267.

<sup>36</sup> Standing Orders 322 and 785.

<sup>37</sup> Profiles are occasionally revised on the recommendations of the Stationing Committee should no matches be made during a particular meeting of the Committee.

equivalent.<sup>38</sup> It would be highly unusual for the committee to appoint a presbyter to a circuit without the circuit having first requesting that a presbyter be provided – not least because the circuit is usually expected to pay the costs of that presbyter – which are perhaps around £50,000 per year.<sup>39</sup> Thus a prior factor before *any* stationing decisions are made concerns the health of the circuit's finances.

The report of the Stationing Committee to the 2017 Methodist Conference contained this exhortation:

The Stationing Committee encourages Districts and Circuits to review the efficacy of very small Circuits and their demands in order to restore a balanced approach that is consistent and sustainable and to ensure that ministers are sent to where they are most needed as opposed to where they can be afforded.

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This exhortation results from a very simple problem: currently ministers are sent precisely to where they can be afforded. If circuits are financially unhealthy, then posts disappear, chapels close and the church's mission is diminished. Yet the geographical placement of a circuit's chapels depend upon which have survived, beginning with the closure of surplus Wesleyan, Primitive or United Methodist chapels following the 1932 union, right up until the survival of the fittest today. But the stationing of presbyters should not be in fulfilment of an edifice complex, maintaining worship in the existing buildings of churches that all compete to have their minister at the same time on a Sunday. How can the Methodist Church proclaim its faith in the incarnation of Christ if because of local financial difficulties it itself fails to be present in the communities across our country which it is called to serve?

However, the Conference itself has hinted at the need for district-level stationing. Alongside each district's name in the list of the stations is a 'ministry deployment figure', which is defined by Standing Order 785 as

the number of presbyters, deacons and presbyteral and diaconal probationers expected to be stationed in appointments to a Circuit in the District or to the District itself, subject to availability of personnel and finance and to any other stationing considerations.<sup>41</sup>

Notice that final 'get-out' clause. It permits the Conference not to station that number of ministers due to a shortage of available ministers, and for the district (or

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<sup>38</sup> Examples include Circuit Treasurers' Meeting; Circuit Budget Committee; Staff and Stewards' Meeting; Circuit Stewards' Meeting; Circuit Leadership Team.

<sup>39</sup> The decision of the 1752 Conference that circuits would provide an allowance to itinerant preachers' wives had by 1769 to be funded from connexional funds as circuits were requesting unmarried preachers. The decision was rescinded soon afterwards (Baker, 'People called Methodists', pp.234-35).

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Owen, '25. Stationing Committee', in Methodist Church, *2017 Reports* (2017), <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2017-25-Stationing-Committee.pdf> (28 October 2017), para. 1.5.

<sup>41</sup> Standing Order 785(6).

its circuits) not to accept that number due to lack of finance to fund their stipends. The exhortation of the 2017 Stationing Committee appears to be frustrated by the Conference's own Standing Orders.

Yet Standing Order 962 requires the district Policy Committee to 'formulate and keep under annual review a development master-plan for the ... circuit staffing of the District' and Standing Order 532(2) requires the circuit to remit to the District the funds required of it by the District Synod. As all money given to each local church belongs to the Methodist Church as a whole,<sup>42</sup> there is already in the connexion the power to allocate money to where ministry needs funding. My own research in 2011 in the comparatively poor Newcastle upon Tyne District identified £5m in *spare* reserves (i.e. beyond six-month running costs) in local church accounts.

I note that the 2017 Conference received a carefully drafted report concerning the deployment of District Safeguarding Officers in order to achieve 'to fulfil the Church's core mission in providing safe environments for all'.<sup>43</sup> This included detailed calculations as to how many hours the districts needed to allocate to their DSOs, and therefore how much to budget for. This budget comes from the districts assessing the circuits for a contribution to the work of the district. Yet districts could also undertake to fund all ordained ministry in the district in the same way. It is one thing to have the funds: but how should presbyters be allocated to districts? The District ministry deployment figure (MDF) was introduced in 2011 as a replacement for the former 'stationing establishment figure' (SEF) which was attached to every circuit. Table 1 charts a five-year history of these figures. Notice that they are apparently arbitrary – the districts amended the unrealistic expectations of their circuits (the SEF) when they amalgamated the figures (the MDF). But even the MDF figures bear no relevance to the apparent number of ministers apparently stationed in the Districts.<sup>44</sup> They were not updated in the light of changed circumstances between 2011 and 2015.<sup>45</sup>

**Table 1. A Comparison of Stationing Establishment Figures (SEF), Ministry Deployment Figures (MDF) and Apparent Actual appointment of ministers.**

	SEF 2010	Apparent Actual 2010	MDF 2011	MDF 2015	Apparent Actual 2015
<b>Cymru</b>	14	14	6	6	7
<b>Wales</b>	67	68	67	67	56
<b>Birmingham</b>	84	63	58	58	64

<sup>42</sup> Methodist Church Funds Act, 1960, s.3.

<sup>43</sup> Tim Carter, '35. Calculating safeguarding time required for Districts', in Methodist Church, *2017 Reports* (2017) <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2017-35-DSO-Hours.pdf> (28 October 2017), 1. It could be argued, however laudable this aim, that the Church's core mission is slightly broader than this definition.

<sup>44</sup> 'Apparent' because there is no distinction between full-time and part-time ministers in the stations. The 'Apparent Actual' figures exclude those ministers stationed in a circuit but not appointed to it.

<sup>45</sup> Even on the occasion of the 2017 reorganisation of three districts in Yorkshire into two, the Conference did not take the opportunity to revise the new districts' ministry deployment figures, but simply redistributed the previous figures (*Minutes2017*, 122, 127).

<b>Bolton &amp; Rochdale</b>	46	35	35	35	31
<b>Bristol</b>	87	78	71	71	61
<b>Cumbria</b>	30	26	27	27	25
<b>Channel Is.</b>	10	10	12	12	10
<b>Chester &amp; Stoke</b>	51	49	53	53	43
<b>Cornwall</b>	51	46	46	46	38
<b>Darlington</b>	61	52	48	48	37
<b>East Anglia</b>	71	66	70	70	55
<b>Isle of Man</b>	7	7	8	8	5
<b>Leeds</b>	61	56	56	56	46
<b>Lincoln</b>	46.5	43	43	43	33
<b>Liverpool</b>	60	44	45	45	39
<b>Manch'er &amp; Stockport</b>	72	68	58	58	57
<b>Newcastle</b>	66	62	65	65	54
<b>Lancashire</b>	60	52	54	54	49
<b>Nottingham &amp; Derby</b>	75	67	69	69	62
<b>Northampton</b>	86	80	84	84	71
<b>Plymouth &amp; Exeter</b>	69	66	66	66	53
<b>Sheffield</b>	78	68	59	59	47
<b>Southampton</b>	83	67	69	69	59
<b>West Yorkshire</b>	60	56	58	58	50
<b>Wolv'n &amp; Shrewsbury</b>	70	58	64	64	55
<b>York &amp; Hull</b>	76	65	67	67	51
<b>Scotland</b>	27	19	22	22	20
<b>Shetland</b>	3	3	3	3	3
<b>Beds, Essex &amp; Herts</b>	71.5	59	65	65	57

<b>London</b>	153	136	138	138	128
<b>South East</b>	97.5	83	77	77	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>1893.5</b>	<b>1666</b>	<b>1663</b>	<b>1663</b>	<b>1441</b>
		SEF/ Actual		MDF/ Actual	2011/2015
		-13.7%		-15.4%	-15.6%

In short, they are irrelevant, and the 'get-out' clause of Standing Order 785 recognises this! However, the very existence of these figures represents the idea that districts might be used as a basis for stationing. The reason they have not is that stationing is determined by finance, not by mission potential.

The Stationing Committee determines its priorities based on a number of factors – one of which is the number of members a presbyter is expected to serve. What if the number of *potential* members were used instead? Would it not be better to ask where there is a comparative *lack* of members and send ministers to plant churches there? Table 2 sets out where the number of people served by presbyters might be maximised based on actual population figures of districts.<sup>46</sup> Notice that as one progresses from the top to the bottom of the table, the movement is from comparatively under-resourced districts to those that are comparatively over-resourced. It would require circuits with money to fund ministers who belong to the connexion, not to their local church. I recognise that this is controversial, though even Paul struggled against churches that were not prepared to share their money with the wider connexion (2 Cor. 8).

**Table 2: Stationing based on Population of Districts**

	Population ('000s) (2011 Census)	One minister per 43,000 people	Apparent Actual Deployment 2015	Change reqd. for equality
<b>Scotland</b>	5213	121	20	+605%
<b>London</b>	8726	203	128	+59%
<b>South East*</b>	4724	110	74	+47%
<b>Beds, E &amp; H</b>	3246	76	57	+33%
<b>Southampton</b>	3097	72	59	+22%
<b>Northampton</b>	3440	80	71	+13%
<b>Cymru</b>	3043	71	7	+13%

<sup>46</sup> Figures have been calculated to notional or natural district 'boundaries', using ward level population figures from the 2011 Census.

<b>Wales</b>			56	
<b>Liverpool</b>	1880	44	39	+13%
<b>Birmingham</b>	3024	71	64	+11%
<b>East Anglia</b>	2205	52	55	-5%
<b>Cumbria</b>	502	12	25	-13%
<b>Bristol</b>	2278	53	61	-15%
<b>Sheffield</b>	1676	39	47	-17%
<b>Manch'er &amp; S</b>	1950	46	57	-19%
<b>Wolv'n &amp; S</b>	1870	44	55	-20%
<b>Bolton &amp; R</b>	1024	24	31	-23%
<b>Nott &amp; Derby</b>	2070	48	62	-23%
<b>Newcastle</b>	1642	38	54	-30%
<b>Darlington</b>	1084	25	37	-32%
<b>Plymouth &amp; E</b>	1542	36	53	-32%
<b>Lancashire</b>	1342	31	49	-37%
<b>Leeds</b>	1172	27	46	-41%
<b>Lincolnshire</b>	798	19	33	-42%
<b>West Yorks</b>	1252	29	50	-42%
<b>Chester &amp; SoT</b>	1023	24	43	-44%
<b>York &amp; Hull</b>	1167	27	51	-47%
<b>Isle of Man</b>	85	2	5	-60%
<b>Channel Is.</b>	164	4	10	-60%
<b>Shetland</b>	23	1	3	-67%
<b>Cornwall</b>	524	12	38	-68%
<b>Total</b>	61786	1441	1441	0%
*Malta is excluded from these figures, as the single local church there has unique stationing requirements.				

It could be argued that population is irrelevant. The Church needs to cover every geographical area. But this is patently not currently the case. Some local authority areas have few Methodist churches, if any, in them. Furthermore, there are large

parts of Scotland with no Methodist presence. If the goal were to serve the whole country geographically, it could be argued that the Church is failing. In rural areas across the country, there is a considerable number of churches with a handful of members. And in the 'border' areas between circuits there are cases of two churches in one village belonging to different circuits and therefore not being required to work with the other church in terms of the planning of personnel. District-level stationing could work to remedy this.

Although Paul could have gone to the furthest corners of the earth (if he had not been prevented from getting to Spain!) he concentrated his missionary journeys on cities. Bishops have generally overseen sees named after the centres of population, not the regions they serve. John Wesley concentrated his own preaching in London, Bristol and Newcastle upon Tyne, seeing early Methodism spread mostly in the population centres to which vast numbers of the working class had migrated during the industrial revolution.<sup>47</sup> He exhorted his 'Helpers' to go 'not only to those who want you but to those who want you most.'<sup>48</sup>

I am not arguing that rural areas should be neglected in favour of urban areas. Rather that if the urban areas are given sufficient mission resources, the church would be in a stronger position to serve the rural areas. In an ageing church, we need to be seeking to attract younger people to our churches, and HM Government has noted that 'The proportion of the population aged under 45 years tends to decline the more rural the settlement type'.<sup>49</sup> Even though there has been slight growth in the rural population, with net internal migration now away from urban areas towards rural areas, the urban population is still growing twice as fast, so the proportion of the population which is based in rural areas is actually reducing. The potential is where the people are: in other words, I am arguing that the rural areas are currently receiving too much ministerial time and this does not appear to be mitigating the decline of the church.

What is needed is a higher-level strategic placement of presbyters than that which happens when the decision-making begins with where the local church has survived, rather than where it may be grown anew. This, beneficially, recovers connexionalism.

## Conclusion

It appears that increasing congregationalism and diminished collegial *episkopé* among circuit staff has been exacerbated by Conference decision-making. If this

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<sup>47</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, 'John Wesley', in Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 1, 35-79 (London: Epworth Press, 1965), pp.59-60.

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, 'The Twelve Rules of a Helper' [1753], in *CPD*, vol. 1, 77-78 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1988), no.11. The 'helpers' were the forerunners of the circuit presbyters.

<sup>49</sup> HM Government, 'Rural population and migration' (2015) [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/566795/Rural\\_population\\_and\\_migration\\_2015\\_v2.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/566795/Rural_population_and_migration_2015_v2.pdf) (28 October 2017), 2. Between 2011-2013, the rural population grew by 0.8 per cent; the urban by 1.6 per cent. Between 2011 and 2014, the proportion of the population based in rural areas reduced from 17.2 to 17 per cent. Although between 40,000 to 120,000 people moved out of London every year from 2003 to 2012, its population still grew by 12 per cent between 2001 and 2011.

were leading to church growth, then this might be acceptable. But the triennial statistics consistently prove otherwise.<sup>50</sup> The church's membership has halved in the past twenty years. The stationing of ministers needs to respond to mission potential, not to historic patterns of settlement or to where finances are healthier. A connexional church needs to recover a connexional approach to stationing. Are circuits the right place to make the decision about how many presbyters to deploy in their area? The evidence seems to indicate otherwise. Wherever the locus of stationing is situated, funds need to follow – for the sake of mission. The circuit may well have enduring value for that mission, but perhaps its usefulness as a locus of stationing is coming to an end. It is time for the Conference to reclaim responsibility for determining its presbyters' stations, and to send them to those who need them most. Otherwise, the church's deployment of presbyters is trapped by its own past. The presbyters are loitering by their forefather's wells in deserted areas (Gen. 26.18) – when there are rivers flowing down the cities' streets (Rev. 22.1-2).

[www.theologyandministry.org](http://www.theologyandministry.org)

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<sup>50</sup> Statistics are published triennially in the *Minutes of the Annual Conference*. The latest figures may be found in *The Minutes of the Annual Conference and Directory of The Methodist Church 2017*, pp.12-15 (London: Methodist Publishing, 2017).



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