

Changing patterns of itinerancy: results of a survey

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The Stationing Review Group reported to the 1997 Methodist Conference in London. The report opens by saying that 'The review was set up by the Conference as the result of apparent widespread discontent with the present stationing system'. Its terms of reference were to seek a system that is 'faithful to our traditions, serves the mission of the Church, is sensitive to the needs and aspirations of ministers and circuits, is easy to understand and operate, is economical in time and money and above all is felt to be sensible and fair'.

The system to be reformed was what many members will recognise as the procedure of circuits approaching ministers through the Conference publication of a list of *Ministers and Stations Available*, commonly called the *Yellow Book* because of the colour of its cover for many successive years. This system had been modified many times. The basic format was fifty word statements submitted both by circuits and ministers. These statements were then bound into the *Yellow Book* and circuit stewards telephoned ministers on a given date and invited them to visit the circuit with a view to an invitation being issued.

The Stationing Committee report listed a number of criticisms of the process of ministers moving by the *Yellow Book*. It was said to be an undignified stampede with certain ministers and certain circuits being at a disadvantage. The career needs of ministers' spouses and the educational needs of their children were not thought to be given adequate attention. Circuit Stewards were wasting valuable time and money on fruitless telephone calls and great stress was caused to ministers and circuits alike. Undoubtedly a very common criticism was that the rules and guidelines could so easily be disregarded. There was no overall connexional control based on mission strategy.

It was agreed that a new system for ministers moving in 1999 should be put in place. The most fundamental change was that there would not be a *Yellow Book of Ministers and Stations Available for 1999*, instead each minister would be commended to a particular circuit appointment by the District Chair. The perceived advantages of this system were listed in the report. There would be a more careful match between ministers and circuits. Better use would be made of the individual and collective knowledge of the District Chairs and the frustration of Circuit Stewards making fruitless enquiries would be eliminated. The special needs of ministers and circuits would be given careful consideration and every appointment would get individual attention. Further advantages would be the reduction of anxiety on the part of ministers and circuits, while still leaving invitation and acceptance to the circuit and the minister. Rule-breaking would be less likely under the new system. It was conceded that two likely disadvantages of such a system would be that some ministers and circuit stewards may feel a loss of freedom and that the District Chairs would have more work to do in the early stages of the new invitation process.

By the end of March 1998 the District Chairs had been informed which ministers were moving and which circuits had vacancies. District Chairs had opportunity to meet with ministers, and where appropriate their spouse/family, and with representatives of the circuits. A new availability list of appointments was compiled using photocopies of six A4 pages which had been completed in the circuits. A similar availability list was compiled of ministers who had been required to complete three A4 pages. The lists of ministers and

appointments were published in mid-April but the full-profiles of these were not generally available. Each District Chair had a copy of all the papers. Circuits had shorter-profiles of ministers moving but this was limited to one page where the minister had simply ticked boxes. Ministers had a two page shorter-profile from each of the circuits where the circuit officers had also ticked boxes. Consequently, in the shorter-profiles neither ministers nor circuits had the opportunity to express themselves in their own words. Instead circuits ticked boxes that best described their preferred minister and desired emphases in ministry (some circuits ticked all the boxes) and ministers felt guilty about the boxes that they decided not to tick (though some ticked them all as well). Ministers and circuits could request a photocopy of a longer-profile of an appointment or minister. There was no rule as to how many longer-profiles could be requested but obviously there were practical considerations of time and expense to bear in mind and it seems that most ministers and circuits were content with about half a dozen.

Ministers were introduced to circuits in rounds. In these ministers and circuits would be matched on the basis of the information submitted and, presumably, what the District Chairs knew (or thought they knew) about individual ministers and particular appointments. The first round was for priority appointments (8 listed) and Superintendencies (65 listed). The second round was to resolve any unfilled appointments from the first round and begin to deal with the general circuit appointments (153 listed). In 1998 the District Chairs met on April 29th and 30th and communicated the first match to the ministers on the 30th. They met again May 12th - 14th to inaugurate the second round and further rounds were arranged, in June, and later in the year. It was by no means easy because some ministers were still arranging to move to new appointments beginning in September 1998 (under the old system) and these were sometimes being made in parallel with ministers who were arranging to move in 1999 (under the new system).

To discover by empirical means how well the new system is working a survey was made of all the ministers who were listed as moving in 1999. This was done by sending them a six page questionnaire. The questionnaire was prepared by Revd John M Haley, a minister who is researching into current trends in the Methodist Church, and who is himself moving in 1999. Questions were formulated under the guidance of Revd Professor Leslie J Francis and Revd Dr William K Kay at Trinity College, Carmarthen, both of whom have carried out similar work on a variety of issues across the denominations.

For different reasons some ministers became unavailable to accept circuit appointments, often because they had moved into other appointments such as Chaplaincies. Though there were 151 ministers on the list of ministers available seven had already moved before 1999 and four sent replies saying that they were no longer available to move in 1999. The survey therefore included 140 ministers. These were invited to reply anonymously and this gave rise to 103 replies (a response rate of over 73%). This high response rate allows the findings reported here to be treated with confidence.

On the basis of the findings from the survey, 85% of ministers moving to a new circuit in 1999 will have served between five and eight years in their present appointment. Though ministers were not specifically asked their reasons for moving it is clear that there is strong support for the concept of itinerancy in the Methodist Church for while 16% said that the invitation system needed abolishing over 63% disagreed, the rest remaining undecided. More

than 84% of ministers moving after five years are happy in their present appointment and this percentage increases to 100% for those ministers moving after seven or eight years.

No list of questions can be comprehensive in the sense that it caters for each individual and variety of circumstances. Ministers were asked to indicate if they agreed with, disagreed with or were uncertain about the statements given below.

Table 1

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The new system relies too much on the District Chairs	55%	15%	30%
I was treated fairly in the new system	68%	11%	21%
I have accepted this invitation because			
I was fearful what would happen if I did not	35%	11%	54%
Ministers should be able to elect to serve a particular stationing region	50%	24%	26%

According to the first statement, more than half of the ministers who are moving under the new system have highlighted one of the disadvantages that the earlier Report to the Conference identified. In fact, though 55% of ministers moving thought that the new system relies too much on the District Chairs, more than half of these ministers expressed this view strongly. Regrettably, some comments appended to the survey implied that the ministers were not confident that the system was being operated as originally intended and there was an uneasiness that some District Chairs may have bartered over particular ministers and appointments or that arrangements within districts or within stationing regions had been tentatively fixed before the full meeting. In fairness only the District Chairs can know absolutely what happened during the process but the fact that there is disquiet among ministers who are not entirely sure what is going on is a weakness of the system.

There appears to be a clear division among the ministers between those who are satisfied and those who are dissatisfied with the system. 68% of ministers feel that they were treated fairly in the new system. However, 21% feel that they were treated unfairly. The problem is centred around the first match. Ministers were also asked how satisfied they were with the first match. Those who were satisfied (70%) with the first match and were invited to the new circuit with relative ease expressed overall satisfaction with the process. Ministers who were dissatisfied (30%) with the first match very clearly feel that they were unfairly treated. This is particularly the case with ministers who were not invited to the first circuit with which they were matched.

A worrying factor is that 35% of ministers agree that at least one reason they have accepted invitations is that they were fearful what would happen if they did not. Closer investigations reveal that this is something felt even more acutely by ministers who were not invited or did not accept an invitation to the circuit with which they were first matched.

Table 2

		Accepted first match		
		Yes	No	Not invited
I have accepted this invitation	<i>Agree</i>	28%	56%	56%
because I was fearful what would	<i>Not certain</i>	12%	6%	11%
happen to me if I did not	<i>Disagree</i>	60%	38%	33%

Table 2 above cross-tabulates the responses to two questions. The columns divide ministers according to how they answered the question about the first match. The rows show whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement about being fearful.

The analysis reveals that 28% of ministers who accepted an invitation to the first match agreed that in part they did so because they were fearful what would happen if they did not. However, for those ministers who accepted an invitation to a second or subsequent match the figure rises to over 56%. Therefore, including those ministers who were not given an invitation to the first match, in real terms thirty ministers who are moving in 1999 have said that one of the reasons they accepted the invitation to the circuit where they will be serving is that they were fearful what would happen if they did not do so. This cannot be an acceptable way for stationing to continue.

In addition to the figures reported here ministers were also given an opportunity to express how well they felt that the first circuit to which they were introduced matched the factors they had indicated as their preferences. Ministers who declined the first match did so for a variety of different reasons and a combination of factors was clearly present in every appointment. However, of those who declined an invitation to the circuit with which they were first matched 56% said that it did not match with the preference they had expressed about a particular sort of work, inner city or rural for example. Though other factors were important this factor was the one that appeared most regularly.

The District Chairs are presently at the heart of the system. Many ministers moving in 1999 feel that there is a serious conflict of interest between the pastoral role and the system role which the District Chairs are forced to exercise. Undue pressure is often felt by the ministers to accept the first appointment and no doubt some District Chairs feel under extreme pressure to fill the appointments in their districts.

When asked about factors which should be given priority in the stationing procedures 94% of the ministers thought that considerable attention should be given in the new matching procedures to the circuits in which a minister expressed an interest. When this was the case the ministers were happy but when this was not the case the ministers were often dissatisfied. Ministers are understandably particularly aggrieved when none of the circuits in which they have expressed an interest is matched with them, especially if there is very little feedback as to what is happening and why.

Many ministers wrote that they feel that it is time to break with the 'all move in September' pattern. Those who commented about elongating the process back to March the year before removal, rather than dealing with extension to invitations at the September Circuit Meeting in the same connexional year that a minister might move, felt that the return to the eighteen

month period was a retrograde step as it meant that ministers and their families were unsettled for far too long. All the more so if a minister would have been keen to stay in a circuit but felt unwanted. Perhaps strangely, when the new stationing system is thought to rely too much on the District Chairs, several ministers asked for more involvement from District Chairs with regard to the possibility of an extension to a circuit appointment. Most ministers are happy in their circuits and want to move at the right time (clearly thought by many ministers to be between five and eight years) without being summarily dismissed for no apparent reason by some circuits which mess about too lightly with the lives of ministers and their families.

The good news about the new system of stationing is that those ministers who are happy about their new appointments seem very happy. The news that must be greeted with great caution is that the system is successful because so many ministers are readily accepting the first or second match. This impression is clearly very misleading. Fear of what will happen to them if they do not accept a first or second match is a very significant consideration for ministers. It should not be so.

On the minister profile for availability list ministers were asked about districts in which they were unable to serve. These were arranged in stationing regions. The first table shows that 50% of ministers questioned said that they would prefer to be able to elect to serve within one stationing region. Only 26% disagreed with that idea. Presumably they could be accommodated by electing to serve in more than one stationing region. Must it be a case of endlessly refining yet another variation on the connexional 'all move in September' pattern or is the time fast approaching when ministers apply for appointments as they become vacant within their preferred region or regions?