

21. Methodist Diaconal Order General Report

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1. The Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO) currently has a complement of 272 members. Of these:

133 are in the active work

121 are supernumerary deacons

8 are student deacons

10 are deacons who hold 'without appointment' status.

This slight drop in numbers is a result of recent deaths and resignations within the Order, and the drop in the number of candidates last year. However, four candidates have been recommended to the 2016 Conference. In addition, one applicant for transfer as a probationer has been recommended for acceptance by the 2017 Conference.

As reported in previous years, much work has been put into combining the respective processes for diaconal candidating, and diaconal student and probationer oversight, with the parallel processes for presbyters. This work is now complete and one of the significant benefits is a much greater understanding of deacons as being part of an order of ministry. However, what has been less widely understood is the deacon as a member of a religious order, and so there is much more work to do on this issue.

2. Move to Methodist Church House (MCH)

The dominant feature on the landscape for much of this, and the last connexional year, has been the relocation of the MDO from 26 St James Road to Methodist Church House (MCH). In many respects, this still remains the case and our new home at MCH continues to feel temporary because the planned building works at MCH are not yet complete. This prevents us from feeling settled, but at least we have now unpacked and made our space as recognisably MDO as we can.

3. Work patterns

The working patterns established two years ago, which were endorsed by the MDO Leadership Group, continue. Broadly speaking, the work of the Warden looks toward the external life of the Order and its relationship to the Connexion and wider Church, strategic planning and representation. The work of the Deputy Warden seeks to support the internal life of the MDO.

4. Faith and Order consultation

One of the highlights of this connexional year for the MDO has been the Regional Gatherings where the Order took part in consultations alongside the Faith and Order Committee in the autumn. Most active deacons, including students and some supernumerary deacons, attended in order that we might reflect and contribute to a piece of work the Conference has asked the Faith and Order Committee to undertake on the theology and ecclesiology of the diaconate.

5. Stationing

Another highlight this year (for very positive reasons) was stationing for deacons, simply because it was very straightforward. All deacons who made themselves available for stationing this year are now matched into appointments. The MDO has produced a new magazine this year which is now

available and contains useful advice and tips to help Circuits in their thinking about the possibility of creating new appointments.

6. Wellbeing

During the course of the year a number of deacons have indicated that their mental health is significantly at threat because of the workload they carry.

Our candidating processes are designed to ensure that those offering for ordained ministry within the Church have a high degree of resilience and personal robustness in order to cope with the stresses that ministry can bring. However, I want to point out that all of those I have been in conversation with would have considered themselves to be strong, robust and resilient deacons – but who are put in the position of being asked to do more and more with diminishing resources. Whilst the MDO rule of life stresses a balanced approach to all things, our ability to achieve this is threatened by the expectations placed upon us. I am seeing a pattern of increasing and unrealistic workloads (brought about mainly due to shrinking financial resources). This surely cannot be the gospel message of the fullness of life we are seeking to model in our lives to those we minister to on behalf of the Church.

7. World Diakonia and ecumenical links

Preparations are underway for the Warden and the Warden–designate to visit the Methodist Order of Deacons (MOD) Convocation in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), as we have established a pattern of attending each other's convocations biennially. This year the visit is particularly significant for two reasons: a) The MOD is going to appoint a new Warden as the current Warden, Vernon van Wyke, is retiring at the end of his current term of office; b) The MOD will be marking the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women to presbyteral ministry. In particular, they will be celebrating the ministry of the Revd Constance Oosthuizen. Constance trained as a deaconess at the Deaconess College in Ilkley before going to South Africa to found the Order of Deacons in the MCSA, where she was Warden and is fondly remembered by the MOD. She responded to a call to presbyteral ministry when this was opened to women, and became the first woman ordained in the MCSA.

8. Moving on

Finally, it would be hard to write this report and not mention the fact that my own journey has taken a significantly different turn than might have been expected, when in the autumn I sought the permission of the President of the Conference to step down from my role as Warden of the MDO. This was not a decision I came to lightly, and is one I had been wrestling with for some time. I have served the MDO as Warden for over eight years and it has been a pleasure and a privilege to lead the Order through some significant periods of change. However, I feel that the time is right for a different style of leadership which might allow the Order to flourish in new ways. I would like to record formally my thanks to all those who have supported me during the time I have held this office – too many to mention individually, but held within my prayers.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

21/1. The Conference received the Report.

21/2. The Conference resolved that the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order shall meet at the Hayes Conference Centre from Tuesday 2 May until Friday 5 May 2017.