

53. Methodist Diaconal Order General Report

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Our life together as deacons and members of the Order

Membership:

The Methodist Diaconal Order currently has a complement of 244 members.

125 in the active work (including six diaconal probationers, one ordained probationer and six diaconal ordinands)

106 supernumerary deacons

Seven diaconal students

Three deacons hold 'without appointment' status

One authorised deacon and one associate deacon in the active work

One supernumerary associate deacon

Ten 'Associate members' and a number of 'Friends' who commit to support the Order through prayer and advocacy.

Since the MDO report to the Conference 2023:

- Five full members and three MDO Associate members have died
- Four diaconal probationers have been received into Full Connexion and full membership of the Order, and ordained into the diaconate within the universal Church.
- Six people were accepted as candidates for training in 2023 and four further candidates will be recommended to the Conference 2024
- 13 members are seeking the permission of the Conference to 'sit down'.

MDO Deputy Warden Discernment process

After six very fruitful years as Deputy Warden, Deacon Ruth Richey will be taking up a new appointment in September 2024. Therefore, the Methodist Council asked the MDO Support and Advisory group and the Warden's Nomination Committee to draw up a process to discern the next Deputy Warden of the Order. The discernment group met together for prayer, review and discernment, and following this careful work the panel came to the shared mind and heart that Deacon Michelle Legumi be nominated to the Methodist Council as the Deputy Warden of the MDO from September 2024 for an initial period of five years.

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Our relationship with other diaconal orders and deacons

The MDO continues to be active in praying for and supporting other Orders of Deacons, looking to build and strengthen ecumenical relationships.

Currently, in collaboration with the United Reformed Church's Church Related Community Workers, a conference 'In the thick of it' is being planned. This follows on from a previous and fruitful conference organised some years ago by the URC to which MDO members were invited. In September 2023 four members of the MDO travelled to Germany to participate in the Diakonia Region Africa-Europe conference and we look forward to sending representatives to the World Diakonia Conference in Tanzania in 2025. We have this year, through DRAE and Convocation, been able to reconnect with the Deaconess Order in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, with two of their members participating in Convocation.

Further work with 2019 Conference Report: The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate and the Methodist Diaconal Order

The following brief statements are an attempt to share with the Conference the Order's work to date on two of the outstanding matters raised by the 2019 Conference Report.

The office of Vice-President of the Methodist Conference:

*5.1.2. In its response to Memorial 1, the 2011 Conference directed that the Methodist Council, **Convocation**, and the Faith and Order Committee were to review and report on the question of whether it is consonant with our understanding for the office of Vice-President to be open to deacons as well as lay people. This question has not been explored during this piece of work and will now be given consideration in the light of this report.*

At the Convocation of 2022, the Order had a full and robust conversation facilitated by the Secretary of the Conference, the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler. A number of perspectives were shared and explored, and there were some differing voices. However, the Convocation generally agreed that it remained important for the deacon's ministry to be recognised as one, which offers servant *leadership*. Regardless of whether or not the office of Vice-President included deacons, it was felt vital that this aspect of ordained diaconal ministry had opportunity to be given full expression and, at least on occasions, be prominent within the life of the Methodist Church.

At the Conference, following the 2022 Convocation conversation, Deacon Kerry Scarlett was elected and designated as Vice-President of the Conference for 2023-2024. She is among only a handful of deaconesses/deacons who have occupied this office and the Order believes she, as with other members before her, has held this office with dignity, wisdom and grace.

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At the 2024 Convocation the Order, believing it has done the work asked of it, agreed to share the following statement with regard to the MDO's mind on this subject with the Conference:

The MDO believes each member who has held the office of Vice-President of the Conference has been able to bring something unique *because* they were a deacon/ess. Therefore, whilst members of the MDO may personally respond differently to the question raised by the 2019 report, there is strong consensus within the Order for the status quo to remain in relation to deacons being able to serve as the Vice President of the Conference.

Diaconal Dress:

5.1.5. There also needs to be some further consideration of the following:

d. Some further reflection on diaconal dress

The colours of navy blue and white forming part of the deacon's formal dress code have not overall been questioned. We have, however, occupied time and energy over the years on what 'items of dress' should be included! Following the 2008 Conference report: *Ministers, Presbyters and Deacons: Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity* the Convocation conferred on this matter. As members, we agreed alongside the navy suit a number of other appropriate dress items; this included robes, clerical collar and casual clothing.

Overall we have been able to uphold with respect and sensitivity one another's choices; however, where any ongoing conversation remained it has focused on the wearing of the clerical collar. Some of us are happy to wear a clerical shirt most of the time and others of us never – and everyone else is somewhere in between! It seems clear to the Order that there cannot be a 'one rule fits all' and opinions and circumstances differ, as has the landscape of ministry since 2008/9. We sense, when we put this issue of dress alongside the needs for the ministry we are called to, to keep such a conversation 'live' simply because we may have different approaches is not a healthy or holy way forward!

Therefore, the following proposals were put before and accepted by the Convocation 2024 (these seek to take into account and expand upon the decisions we made in 2009, the guidance of the Ordination Handbook and current practices):

Formal Dress:

- A navy suit (ie jacket with trousers/skirt/dress – at ordination: jacket with trousers/skirt);
- The MDO lapel badge on the left- hand lapel of the jacket;

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- The MDO Cross;
- A white shirt/blouse and, if wished, a navy tie;
- Or a white or navy clerical shirt (at ordination: a white clerical shirt)

Casual forms of dress:

- Navy and white with the Order's cross/badge or printed on them eg sweatshirts, polo shirts;
- Or what is appropriate for the situation

Cassocks and Robes

- Navy with a scarf/stole, which includes the badge of Order.

Whenever choosing to wear a clerical shirt:

- Colour: navy or white;
- With badge and/or Cross of MDO (unless circumstances prohibit).

Whilst recognising within the Order there are minor differing views around these two areas, we note that both are subjects on which we, as an Order, have already had significant conversations and reflections over the years. It is, therefore, our hope that no further conferring is required at this stage by the MDO and that we might now summarise our reflections and live graciously where there are differing approaches.

The Convocation

The overarching theme for our Convocation this year was 'Embodying Community'. Building and being community has been, and continues to be, a significant part of the story of the Methodist Diaconal Order. The Conference Report of 2019 affirms 'the MDO models discipleship as part of belonging to a community, potentially prompting wider reflection on what it means to journey with one another, to be a praying people, and to live for God and neighbour'.

Community building and belonging are regarded as characteristic of the ministry of deacons. The Diakonia World Federation reminds us, authentic community 'is centred in the **whole** community of Christ. Ideally in community people share what they have, receive what they need, and find support and encouragement for service in the world'. A characteristic of our ministry but not exclusive to the diaconate, it is a task we share with others and so we were delighted that at this year's Convocation, once again, there were a significant number of guests to welcome, to learn and share with.

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Our guests included:

The President of the Conference, the Revd Gill Newton, accompanied by the Vice-President, Deacon Kerry Scarlett, who, as an active member of the MDO, needed no introduction, however the Convocation was delighted to be able to welcome her and receive from and celebrate the ministry of the Presidency.

We were enabled in deepening our theological reflection of what it means to be in community by the Revd Dr Raj Bharat Patta and the Revd Romeo Regardo Pedro who graciously invited us into that 'wider reflection on what it means to journey with one another, to be a praying people, and to live for God and neighbour'.

A number of guests from around the Connexion and the Connexional Team alongside members also participated in aiding the Convocation to delve deeply into our theme. Encouraged by the Vice-President, the Director of Social Justice and Social Action and the Methodist Anti-Poverty Coordinator we explored 'Being a Justice Seeking Community'; Guided by the Order's Net Zero working group we took further steps into 'Being an Eco Conscious Community'. Running through our worship, business, and reflecting was the call to recognise ourselves as God sees us, as a Beloved Community.

In our worship and in the formal business of the Conference Diaconal Committee we heard the stories and testimonies of those at significant stages of vocation and life; this included celebrating two members reaching their 60th year of ordination and two members reaching their 70th year of ordination. We gave thanks and remembered those members who had died in the past year and celebrated those who were brought into Full Connexion with the Conference, became full members of the Order and were ordained at the 2023 Conference. We recognised the ministry of those seeking permission of the Conference to 'sit down' this year. We recommended to the Conference the candidates for acceptance into initial formation and training; the students and probationers to continue on trial; probationers to be recommended for reception into Full Connexion, full membership of the order and (if not already ordained) ordination. (See the report of the Conference Diaconal Committee elsewhere in the Agenda.)

The Convocation held an evening of Community Celebration in gratitude and love for the ministry of Deacon Ruth Richey, the Deputy Warden. This included the sharing of fellowship and fun, prayers and gifts. The Convocation wished Ruth well as she prepares for her new appointment, promising to hold her and Michelle Legumi in our prayers as together we all adjust to new places and new teams.

In the closing service reflecting on Romans 8, the President charged us to dwell in hope, to not get lost in the great expanse but to seek 'the star' that guides into God's way - the way of hope and renewal for all. The Warden and the Deputy Warden led the Service of Rededication in which each member, full, probationer, student, associate and authorised

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was required to reaffirm their commitment and willingness to take up the opportunities, obligations and privileges of ministry as deacons in God's church and our shared life within the community of the Methodist Diaconal Order. We did so trusting in God's help and grace to enable us as individuals and as a religious order to live the life of a beloved Community called into a life of prayer and a ministry witness and service for sake of all God's beloved world.

Prayer of the Convocation:

Listen and hear:

Be still and know

God is here

Be still and know

Love is here

Loving God, you call us 'Beloved'.
In this moment of our lives help us
to be one with You and with each other.

Amen

*****RESOLUTIONS**

53/1. The Conference receives the Report.

53/2. The Conference resolves that the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order shall meet at Yarnfield Park, Staffordshire from Tuesday 6 May until Friday 9 May 2025.