

What is a Deacon?

Introduction

This paper has been produced by a working group including members of the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, and attempts to clarify the Methodist Church's current understanding of diaconal ministry. It constitutes a parallel paper to What is a Presbyter?¹ and provides the foundation for the Principles introducing Standing Orders to Part 7: Ministers and Deacons.

The Report

1. The starting points for this discussion are:
 - the Deed of Union²
 - the 1974 Statement on Ordination³
 - the 1993, 1995 and 1997 reports on deacons⁴
 - the service of ordination and reception into full membership of the Methodist Diaconal Order, most recently that in the 1999 *Methodist Worship Book*⁵
 - the Methodist Diaconal Order Rule of Life⁶
 - the Methodist Diaconal Order Mission Statement⁷

2. Model of Church Life and Ministry

God as Trinity is the model for Church life and ministry underpinning this paper. Speaking of the one God as a loving communion of three co-equal 'persons' suggests that the Church should be a community of mutual support and love in which there is no superiority or inferiority.⁸ Interdependent partners exist in a community where they lovingly interweave and also retain a distinctive individuality. The image of these three persons engaged in a dance conveys something of the dynamic involved. All Methodist people, including those in ordained ministry, are called to such a community life.

¹ See 'What is a Presbyter?' (*Conference Agenda* 2002: pp. 446-454) and 'Releasing Ministers for Ministry' (*Conference Agenda* 2002: pp. 455-467, esp. sections 6.3 – 6.5).

² Adopted by the uniting Conference in 1932. The current form of the Deed of Union is to be found in Part 1, Volume 2 of the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2003 [hereafter CPD 2003]), pp. 203-37.

³ *Conference Agenda* 1974: pp. 253-67; reprinted in *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order 1933-1983* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2000 [hereafter *Statements* 2000: 1]), pp. 108-119.

⁴ 'The Methodist Diaconal Order' (*Conference Agenda* 1993: pp. 223-244; reprinted in *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order 1984-2000* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2000 [hereafter *Statements* 2000: 2]), pp. 291-314); 'The Methodist Diaconal Order' (*Conference Agenda* 1995: pp. 713-721; = *Statements* 2000: 2, pp. 315-22); 'The Diaconate' (*Conference Agenda* 1997: pp. 165-191; = *Statements* 2000: 2, pp. 323-46).

⁵ *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 1999 [hereafter *MWB*]) pp. 313-328.

⁶ Approved by the Conference in 1998 (*CPD* 2003: pp. 788-9).

⁷ Approved by Methodist Diaconal Order Convocation 1997.

⁸ Called to Love and Praise 2.1.9 (= *Statements* 2000: 2, p. 10).

3. Understanding of Ordained Ministry

3.1 The basic principles about ordained ministry made in the report *What is a Presbyter?* apply to both presbyters and deacons. There are then particular expressions of them which apply either to presbyters or to deacons respectively.

3.1.1 First, being and acting as a deacon is a particular expression of a calling to discipleship that is shared by all Methodists.

3.1.2 Second, the ministry of deacons is therefore interdependent with all other forms of ministry (lay and ordained) within the whole people of God. None can be said to have priority over the others. Each requires the others.

3.1.3 Third, what makes the discipleship of deacons distinctive is that it is marked by representative selection. It is the calling of the whole Church to exercise discipleship in worship and mission, and:

as a perpetual reminder of this calling and as a means of being obedient to it the Church sets aside men and women, specially called, in ordination. In their office the calling of the whole Church is focused and represented, and it is their responsibility as representative persons to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world.

(‘Ordination’ 1974 para. 14; cf. Called to Love and Praise para. 4.5)⁹

Both the Deed of Union and the 1974 Statement on Ordination which developed this concept were written before British Methodism formally recognised that it had received the Diaconate from God as an order of ministry and began the practice of receiving members of the Methodist Diaconal Order into full connexion prior to ordaining them. Nevertheless what they say about reception into full connexion and ordination applies to deacons as well as presbyters: as the report on *The Methodist Diaconal Order* adopted by the 1993 Conference states “The Statement on Ordination, adopted by the Conference of 1974 was..... largely concerned with presbyteral ministry. It does however, adopt a position on the meaning of ordained ministry which is as relevant to diaconal ministry as to presbyteral. This may be called the ‘representative’ view of ordained ministry”.¹⁰

⁹ *Statements* 2000: 1, p. 111; *Statements* 2000: 2, pp. 47-50

¹⁰ *Statements* 2000: 2, p. 306.

3.2 The starting point must therefore be the calling of all God's people to share in the work of worship, mission and service, both before God and in the world. The particular ministries of presbyters and deacons can only be understood within this context, as focussing, expressing and enabling the ministry of the whole people of God. All such ministry is, as the word implies, *service*: service to God in service to the church and the world. Thus, servant ministry is the task and calling of the whole people of God as they seek to continue the work of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit; taking Christ as pattern and inspiration: 'I am among you as one who serves' (Lk 22.27).

3.3 The task of the deacon is to focus that servant ministry in particular. The role of the deacon is to offer a visible expression that

- a) focuses on (draws attention to and makes clear) the nature and meaning of this ministry and
- b) encourages and enables others to undertake this ministry with greater effectiveness in their own daily lives

The deacon's primary purpose is to enable others. Deacons also act as a model and sometimes pioneer too. They often possess specialist skills in some aspect of diaconal work yet always work collaboratively, helping others develop their gifts. It is in this sense that the deacon represents, rather than replaces. They are authorised by Conference to be public people representing God-in-Christ to the World and representing the World and Church before God. They constantly seek to serve the needs of the Kingdom in the power of the Spirit through who they are and what they do.

3.4 British Methodist deacons focus and represent the servant-hood of Christ not just through being an *order of ministry* (a group of people set apart by the Church under a life-long commitment to serve God and the Church in the world) but also through being a *religious order* (a group of people who make a life-long commitment to each other to support each other in a shared discipline of the religious life). As a body of deacons who belong to an order of ministry, the Methodist Diaconal Order exercises a leading, public, and representative role of service in and on behalf of the Church. Through being a religious order the MDO seeks to model for the Church a way of discipleship in which individuals journey in company with one another. Personal and social holiness are combined, and prayerful reflection issues in prayer-filled action. A life of fellowship and prayer nurtures each member and prepares them for mission. In this way the MDO pursues John Wesley's vision for the Methodist.

3.5 For British Methodist deacons, the aspects of being in an order of ministry and being a religious order are completely intertwined. Being a sign and instrument of *wholeness*, through God's grace, is at the heart of diaconal ministry and vital to understanding what it means to be a deacon within British Methodism (see MDO Rule of Life).

4. Deacons representing Servant Ministry: *Diakonia*

4.1 Recent years have seen widespread development of the Diaconate throughout the world and in many denominations, in response to the leading of the Spirit.¹¹ This has been accompanied by renewed interest in the theology of diaconal ministry. The World Council of Churches' definition of the ministry of deacons has received broad endorsement:

*Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in Church life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of congregations: for example, by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfil certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance.*¹²

Similarly, a UK Ecumenical Diaconal Consultation in 1997 noted a converging vision for diaconal ministry as:

*Christ-focused, people-centred and lived out in a lifestyle both active and contemplative... We increasingly perceive our role to be pioneering and prophetic, responding to needs, proactive in opportunity through commitment to mission and pastoral care within and beyond the Church. Opening doors of opportunity, encouraging others to take risks, the contemporary diaconate acting in its capacity as 'agent of change', engages imaginatively and collaboratively with issues of justice, poverty, social and environmental concerns. We often find ourselves spanning boundaries, especially official ones of Church and society.*¹³

¹¹ See the World Federation of Diakonia for information www.diakonia-world.org.

¹² *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC 1982), M31 p. 27

¹³ *The Windsor Statement on the Diaconate* (1997: produced at MDO Centre, 26 St James Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham). The Church of Scotland, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, the British Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England were represented at the meeting. Conversations also included Church Related Community Workers from the United Reformed Church and an Orthodox deacon in training.

There is thus broad ecumenical agreement on the nature of diaconal ministry, despite differences in the ecclesiological position of deacons and the relative emphasis given to different aspects of their ministry.

- 4.2** The process of responding to God's call to participate in the servant ministry of Christ continues a pattern seen throughout church history. The Holy Spirit prompts and empowers a body of Christians to respond to a need in society. The particular shape service takes is then determined both by the Spirit and the concrete situation. This causes disciples to re-read the New Testament with fresh eyes, both to review their reading of it, and to re-visit their current understandings of ministry in Church and World.
- 4.3** As noted in the 1993 Report on the Diaconate, the New Testament evidence of patterns of ministry is limited and there has been a diversity of understandings of diaconal ministry over the centuries.¹⁴ The early Christian community shaped its patterns of ministry in response to perceived needs (e.g. Acts 6). The same goes for the foundation and development of diaconal work in British Methodism since the 1890s. The main texts that inspire and form the identity of Methodist deacons are familiar ones from the life and ministry of Jesus: Jn 13.1-20, Mk 9.4-35/Matt 23.11/Lk 22.24-27, Mk 10.45, Matt 25.31-46, Lk 4.18-19 and Acts 6.1-6 (together with the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah). Whilst most of these texts do not relate directly to deacons, they portray diaconal attitudes and behaviour for all Christians to model. This emphasises the representative nature of ordained ministry in the Methodist Church (section 3 above).
- 4.4** Thus, it is the self-emptying, self-offering love of Christ that reaches beyond established boundaries, cares for the most vulnerable, seeks healing, justice, liberation and restoration, and so proclaims the Good News of God's Kingdom which is the foundation of, and template for, diaconal ministry. Loving service remains fundamental because of Jesus' example. Recent biblical scholarship does, however, offer evidence of a broader understanding of service than has often been portrayed.
- 4.5** The title 'deacon' comes from the Greek work *diakonia* and its associates. A deacon (*diakonos*) is someone who engages in *diakonia*. The traditional understanding has been service, often in the sense of menial charitable activity performed in a humble manner (where humble has come to mean servile).¹⁵ Examination of the *diakonia* word group in the New Testament, however, shows first, that writers used it in rich and varied ways and, second, that

¹⁴ Statements 2000: 2, pp. 293-300

¹⁵ Bowman Stephenson's second principle for deaconess formation and behaviour, however, was 'discipline without servility' (Concerning Sisterhoods, (Printed at the Children's Home, Bonner Road, 1890), p.64).

translators have obscured this complexity and often skewed the meaning of texts.¹⁶ The influential work of John N Collins explored the meaning of *diakonia* in secular usage and then applied this to the New Testament literature.¹⁷ Collins found that just as today the term ‘minister’ can denote someone of high status and authority holding cabinet-rank in a government, so those formally recognised as exercising *diakonia* in the ancient world were leaders holding considerable positions. Collins concluded that the primary meaning centred around agency, message and attendance, where deacons

- act as ambassador or agent of change commissioned to carry out a task on behalf of a superior, or as a mediator to involve others in doing so;
- deliver a highly important message as a spokesperson, go-between, courier from the messenger’s superior;
- attend upon a person or household, performing various tasks for or on behalf of them.

Thus in New Testament usage the central idea of *diakonia* has to do with being a responsible agent on behalf of a superior (God or the Christian community), carrying the authority necessary to fulfil a vital commission. In exercising authorised leadership amongst others or acting as an ambassador, however, deacons are to remember the radical redefinitions of power, dignity, authority and leadership contained in the words and example of Jesus.

4.6 In recent decades deacons have sought to develop their theology and practice on the basis of this enlarged understanding of *diakonia*, whilst retaining loving service (without servility) as the central guiding principle.¹⁸ This interpretation supports several aspects of Methodist understanding of the Diaconate. Deacons are primarily heralds of the Gospel: attending to needs through loving service and proclaiming a vital message are ways of fulfilling the ONE commission. Methodist deacons witness through a combination of service-and-proclamation in their appointments, as envisaged by Bowman Stephenson from the start.¹⁹

4.7 Ordination is therefore into a full and permanent diaconate to act as representatives (ambassadors) of the Church with authority to lead, focus and enable servant ministry. The two dimensions involved in ‘service of God’ are thereby realized: service on God’s behalf (e.g. to a marginalized group) is service addressed to God (as in Matt 25.31-46). Indeed, deacons help

¹⁶ For example, in Acts 6 the word stem in relation to the Seven is translated as ‘distribution of food’ (v. 1) and ‘waiting/service at tables’ (v. 2), and in relation to the Twelve apostles as ‘the ministry of the word’ (v. 4).

¹⁷ *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990).

¹⁸ In *Deacons and the Church* (Leominster: Gracewing 2002) Collins himself maintains that *diakonia* is solely a ministry of the word, having nothing to do with loving service. However, to arrive at this judgement he excludes the Mk 9/Matt 23/Lk 22, Mk 10, Matt 25 and Acts 6 passages mentioned above from consideration, saying their use of ‘diakon-’ has no immediate relevance to the theology or practice of the diaconate.

¹⁹ In *Concerning Sisterhoods* he set out the three fields of diaconal work as moral and spiritual education, ministry to the sick and evangelistic visitation.

everyone remember that in performing acts of service for God we encounter and are served by God in and through the other person.

5 Core emphasis of Methodist diaconal ministry: a ministry of witness through service

5.1 Deacons never cease to be disciples participating in the worship and mission of the Church along with all other disciples. At the same time their particular vocation leads them into a role of leading, encouraging and equipping others. Thus in the 1999 service for the ‘Ordination of Deacons’ we find the following addressed to the Ordinands:

In his (i.e. God’s) name you are:

*to assist God’s people in worship and prayer;
to hold before them the needs and concerns of the world;
to minister Christ’s love and compassion;
to visit and support the sick and the suffering;
to seek out the lost and the lonely;
and to help those you serve to offer their lives to God.*

Fulfil your calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.

*In all things, give counsel and encouragement
to all whom Christ entrusts to your care.
Pray without ceasing.
Work with joy in the Lord’s service.
Let no one suffer hurt through your neglect.*

and addressed to God about those being ordained:

*Give them wisdom and patience in their witness and service,
and unfailing love for those whom they serve.*

*May their lives reflect your glory
that they may be faithful examples to your people.*

*Guide and uphold them at all times
that with those whom they serve
they may rejoice in their ministry.*

5.2 The core emphasis of the ministry of deacons can therefore be characterised as **witness through service**. This is expressed in:

- embodied acts of pastoral care, mercy and justice, and being or acting as a prophetic sign;
- spoken acts of evangelism, apologetics, theological and prophetic interpretation, teaching, encouragement, the articulation of faith and human experience, and the leading of worship that may (for those duly accredited) include preaching.

These two strands of witness through service are highlighted in the ordination service and are inseparable in the deacon's role as messenger of the Gospel, such that the one necessarily contains the other. For a Methodist deacon, every act of witness (spoken or embodied) is to be exercised as a form of servant ministry, or it becomes an expression of human power or of self-seeking. Similarly, every act of service is to be exercised as a form of witness, or it becomes a form of servility or an action of merely ethical worth.²⁰

5.3 *Doers of the Word* was the name of the Order's annual magazine for many years. The phrase both indicates an active, embodied dimension to proclamation and points to service as something more than simply acts of lowly, humble charity toward those in need. Service is a powerful way of proclaiming the message of Good News in all its dimensions of prophetic challenge, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and renewal. By expressing God's unconditional love in many concrete and practical ways, deacons embody the Gospel message so that it may be more clearly understood and responded to.

5.4 Deacons are messengers authorised to proclaim the Good News and intermediaries with a particular responsibility to make connections between Church and World. Methodist deacons focus on extending the table of fellowship to groups outside the gathered worshipping community through a range of means from evangelism and teaching to extended communion and work in secular agencies. Prophetic, political, social and environmental action directed toward peace, justice and reconciliation are equally important aspects of proclamation alongside leading worship and instructing people in the faith. The primary purpose in focusing diaconal ministry is to help all Christians discover, develop and express their own servant ministry. Deacons therefore engage in educational and nurturing activities to enable people to

²⁰ See further section 4 above in general, and 4.6 and 4.7 in particular.

see God's activity in daily life and world, and to encourage them in expressing their faith in relevant ways.

- 5.5** The pattern for this witness through service is the ministry of Christ. The scene of foot-washing in John 13 continues to offer deacons important insights into the nature of such service. Jesus startles and challenges the disciples and in so doing undermines their working definitions of dignity, power, authority and leadership. His words of instruction indicate mutuality in service, as foot-washing brings cleansing, renewal and hope for both washer and washed. Indeed, empowerment for service requires that one receives first. The renewal sought is that of the whole person (physical and spiritual) and of an entire community. Service between group members is also shown to be a way of reconciliation with God and with each other. Use of towels and basins frequently involves encounter with dirt, blood and vomit, making acts of service potentially subversive and challenging for society as well as the individuals involved.
- 5.6** Kneeling to wash feet involves a position of vulnerability and John 13 itself points toward the cross (13.1-2, 18-19). The self-giving service of Jesus involves cost and deacons are to minister in a manner that helps other Christians recognise the costly nature of discipleship. However, such self-giving is frequently misunderstood. Kneeling to wash another's feet indicates care and valuing of that person, not lack of care for, or devaluing of, self. Jesus was not servile, weak or self-abasing. He had a strong sense of his own identity, grounded in his father's love. It was out of that strength that he was able to give so much to others.
- 5.7** Deacons remind the Church of God's consistent bias toward the poor and oppressed. They are charged, as the ordination service declares, with holding before God's people the needs and concerns of the world, supporting the weak, binding up the broken, gathering in the outcast, welcoming the stranger and seeking the lost.²¹ Here servant ministry clearly reflects the Servant Christ whose mission involved crossing boundaries, making connections between alienated or fragmented groups, including those beyond the margins, overturning unjust structures, standing in solidarity with the vulnerable and helping them discover their own voice.
- 5.8** The ministry depicted in Acts 6 is also instructive here. A common interpretation suggests a group of Seven engaged in charitable food distribution in order to free the Twelve for preaching the word. Yet in the following chapters of Acts the Seven are heavily engaged in preaching and evangelism. The meaning of *diakonia* in Acts 6.2 is not altogether clear, but an understanding of it as witnessing to the Gospel through service and proclamation fits the

²¹ *MWB*, pp. 317 and 323.

context. It is, however, clear that the *diakonia* of the Seven was directed toward a community culturally and linguistically distinct from the Hebrew/Aramaic Jewish Christian community. The new community probably lacked the networks and resources needed to support its widows and orphans, as well as being unable to participate in the worshipping community because of language barriers. It appears the Seven were selected because their particular skills and experience made them effective, appropriate people to connect with and to lead this marginalized and disadvantaged group. The Seven were able to challenge injustice in the way the common fund was distributed, to care for them, share the Gospel with them, and to teach them.

- 5.9** Acts 6 thus demonstrates how the early Christian community responded to fresh and changing needs in terms of the ministry offered. Similarly today, demands made upon the Church will change, and the form that diaconal ministry takes will vary from place to place and from deacon to deacon. It changes over time in response to the needs of the World and the missionary tasks of the Church. This means it frequently takes place beyond the margins of the Church and respectable society. Yet, whatever form diaconal ministry takes, deacons remain representatives authorised and sent by the Church, owned and supported as such.
- 5.10** The various aspects of witness through service outlined above are expressed in worship and mission. Although each is frequently undertaken beyond the gathered Church, it is always rooted within it. None of them is exclusive to deacons. Nevertheless, even if they are shared with lay people and presbyters, the combination of them in the context of being a member of a dispersed religious order (as outlined in section 6 below) is definitive and unique to the role of the deacon. The fact that deacons concentrate on witnessing through service has a profound effect in itself and, at the same time, imparts a distinctive nature to each of the activities of a deacon's ministry. For example, there is a distinctive quality to a ministry of service when it is not linked to pastoral responsibility but offers a prophetic voice from the margins and when servant leadership is exercised from 'alongside' those on society's edge. There is a distinctive quality to witness when it is not primarily linked to preaching but maintains a vital link with the daily experience of the people who are being served. It requires of the deacon a perceptive, imaginative creative ability to reflect theologically on and in daily life.
- 5.11** At ordination, deacons are given a particular responsibility within the worshipping life of God's people: to remind them of the needs and concerns of the world and to help them offer their lives to God (as expressed in the commitments made at the Ordination service, section 5.1 above). Through their involvement in worship deacons help connect Church with World, and represent the unity of worship and service. Service is shown to have meaning and integrity because its

source is in God, and worship becomes fully effective when it issues in love-in-action. There are many traditional, widely used ways of nurturing such integration and symbolising diaconal ministry in worship.²² Methodist deacons are, however, involved in a rich variety of appointments and service and it is therefore entirely right that the precise form of their involvement in worship should vary too. It is important, though, that any functions or symbolic roles undertaken by a deacon in worship are appropriate and relevant to the local context, accurately reflect what an ordained British Methodist deacon is, and complement the roles of others involved in worship.

5.12 The deacon's ministry of witness through service is thoroughly sacramental. This is an important recognition lest such ministry be viewed only as a series of charitable acts. The whole of life contains visible signs of invisible grace, and the deacon's particular role is to draw attention to God's presence and activity in ordinary, surprising and sometimes shocking places and events, often far beyond the identifiable Church. 'Towel and basin' ministries of mess, dirt and menial tasks are revealed as places of encounter with God. Faithfulness to God's calling demands that the Church acts out of its remembrance of Jesus' instructions regarding the washing of feet as well as the breaking of bread. Deacons help focus, represent and enable this calling. Thus the mundane is seen to be the edge of glory.

6 The spiritual heart of Methodist diaconal ministry: a dispersed religious order

6.1 Methodist deacons are not only members of an order of ministry but also members of a religious order known as the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO).²³ Standing Order 750(1) states that 'The Methodist Diaconal Order is a religious order to which those who belong to the order of deacon in the Church of God are admitted by the act of the Conference'. Standing Order 750(4) makes it plain that the act of the Conference referred to here is that of receiving them into full connexion with the Conference and authorising their ordination into the order of ministry. At the Ordination Service for deacons, ordinands are therefore received into membership of the religious order with these words:

*Receive this badge
as a sign of the membership of the Order
to which you have been admitted by your ordination.*

²² See e.g. 'Church and Ministry: a theological framework', a Formation in Ministry discussion paper, available from the Formation in Ministry office of the Methodist Church, Methodist Church House, London. Also 'The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity', Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, Anglican Communion Publications 1996.

²³ In continuity with the Wesley Deaconess Order which was formed from several Methodist deaconess orders and Sisterhoods dating back to the late 19th century. Originally an Order for women only, men were first admitted in 1986/7.

As part of the declaration that is then made to them, the newly ordained deacons are reminded:

You are to share fully in the life of your Order and to keep its discipline.

What this life and discipline of the Order consists of is set out in Standing Order 750(3): ‘The Order shall have a Rule of Life, approved by the Conference, so as to provide a framework for the devotional life of each member, for discipline, mutual care and accountability, and for individual and collective commitment to the ministry of a deacon.’

- 6.2** Methodist deacons make a public, lifelong commitment to following this Rule of Life and living as members of a religious community. This commitment is renewed and reaffirmed annually at the Convocation. At the meeting of the Convocation immediately prior to the Conference at which they are due to be received into full connexion and ordained, probationers solemnly promise to the members of the Order that they will enter the communal commitment with them, and the Order promises to receive them and support them in it. At the Ordination service the handing over of the badge of the Order and the declaration that accompanies it puts the seal on this process.
- 6.3** The **Rule of Life** both expresses and forms the MDO’s identity. It is a framework for helping deacons become the people God wants them to be, both individually and as an Order. The Rule of Life is a tool for liberating deacons to find a sense of wholeness in the rhythm of life, and so is followed by all deacons, adapted to personal circumstances and needs in the light of experience. It is thus lived out in a spirit of self-discipline within a common discipline under God and becomes a blessing and a joy, bringing glory to God.
- 6.4** Deacons are members of a geographically dispersed community and express their spirituality in diverse ways. Following the Rule of Life is one key way in which deacons commit themselves to nurturing a sense of identity, belonging and responsibility. The Rule of Life involves:
- 6.4.1** - a devotional life of collective worship, private daily study and prayer including a time of intercession for sisters/brothers in the Order, regular times of self-examination, use of a spiritual director/companion, making time for retreats or quiet days and meeting with other deacons for study, reflection and worship.

as part of:

- 6.4.2** - a disciplined life with order and rhythm allowing time for study and relaxation, personal

relationships, relating to one's local community, mutual practical and prayerful support of fellow deacons, regularly meeting in local groups and annually as a whole Order in Convocation; and also expressing a careful stewardship of time, talents, money and possessions that enjoys and uses God's gifts wisely.

6.5 Followed with sensitivity, honesty and wisdom, the Rule becomes a framework helping to sustain and enrich one's own life and that of one's sisters and brothers in the Order – especially those experiencing difficulties in personal life or working in isolated, marginal places.

6.6 Role of 'The Centre'

The MDO's base is known as 'The Centre' and this name indicates its special significance for deacons as hub of a wheel.²⁴ The Centre plays an important role in creating and nurturing wholeness within the Order's life, holding various elements together. It provides the spiritual and physical focus for this dispersed religious community, and is regarded as a spiritual home. The Centre facilitates wholeness through integrating public ministry and religious order, personal and communal spiritual life, work and worship. It is a place of prayer for the World, Church, deacons and those in need. It is a place for spiritual growth, retreat, healing and nourishment of deacons, and for developing their skills in ministry. It is also a place where members gather regularly for prayerful discernment, consultation and decision-making about the Order. Committee work, pastoral care, administration and worship are all held together, and thus the religious life enables diaconal work.

6.7 Being a religious order, however, has much wider significance than simply supporting fellow deacons. It also contributes to:

6.7.1 - encouraging and enabling other Methodists – through representing and modelling a way of discipleship.²⁵ The MDO Rule of Life is neither exclusive nor extra-ordinarily difficult to follow. It does highlight the importance of commitment to a disciplined spirituality and affirms that a life of discipleship is open to all. Deacons offer hope by being a group of ordinary women and men with diverse expressions of spirituality and individual circumstance, living in different places across the connexion and taking personal responsibility for interpreting a shared framework in ways appropriate to their own situation. Through their struggles deacons challenge all Methodists to think about how they too can live a disciplined Christian life of service without necessarily making a commitment to the MDO. Living creatively out of a Rule

²⁴ The common term used in various religious traditions is 'Mother House'.

²⁵ 'Deacons... offer Methodism and the wider church the discipline, spirituality and commitment to community that is part of working out their personal vocation in the context of being a religious order' ('The Methodist Diaconal Order' 1993; Statements 2000: 2, p.308).

also means deacons model a form of Christian spirituality that is dynamic and relevant to contemporary society.

6.7.2 - reminding the whole Methodist Church of its calling to be an open, welcoming community that reaches out beyond itself: a community where disciples share what they have and are, and lovingly watch over, build up and encourage one another in order to serve God in the World. A collective witness more powerful than the voice of individuals becomes possible. Living in a way that cherishes life-giving relationships also offers a helpful alternative to an increasingly fragmented, individualistic and competitive society. By celebrating and working with the challenges that come from being a group of varied and flawed individuals, the MDO gives a hopeful model. Above all, it asserts that becoming fully human in the image of God requires living in relationship with others.

6.7.3 - serving God in the World: The first Methodist deaconesses and sisters were organised as a religious community who trained and prayed together and often lived and worked in twos or threes because this proved the best way of enabling them to ‘go where you are needed, and to leave the place where you are needed less, in order to go to the place where you are needed more’²⁶ (Ordination Service 1936). The MDO continues to exist as a religious order sharing a simple rule of life and a commitment to mutual accountability. This is because, in words attributed to one deacon “Belonging is part of our work.... Costly, joyful, single-minded commitment to our common calling has proved specific enough to create a profound sense of membership among those who share it and made possible a willingness and availability to go where needed”. The commitment to itinerancy through direct stationing allows deacons to be mobilised effectively and creatively on behalf of God through the Conference.²⁷

7. Order of Ministry and a Religious Order

7.1 British Methodism offers a unique contribution to the wider Church: deacons as focussing and representing servant ministry as much through being members of a religious order as being part of an order of ministry in full connexion with the Conference.²⁸

²⁶ The Book of Offices (London: Methodist Publishing House 1936) p. 69. From the Ordination of Deaconesses, drawing on the phrase of John Wesley: ‘Go always, not only to those who want (ie need) you, but to those who want (ie need) you most.’

²⁷ This involves deacons being stationed as a single body where available individuals and appointments are matched, without the choice of either deacon or circuit. Although costly for deacons and their families, itinerancy through direct stationing is accepted by members because it allows for an overview of both the individuals available and the mission priorities across the Connexion and then effective matching of gifts with requirements.

²⁸ ‘A...deacon’s membership of the Methodist Diaconal Order (as a religious order) is an additional element marked within the ordination liturgy but distinct from the laying on of hands with prayer...It is inherent to the ministry of a...deacon, not least when working in marginalized places, to belong to the kind of community which is the MDO. No candidate should therefore be ordained to diaconal ministry in Methodism, who will not gladly belong to the Order’ (‘The Diaconate’ 1997 4.8.2-3, in Statements 2000: 2, p.331).

- 7.2** The British Methodist Diaconate has been a permanent, distinctive diaconate since the formation of the Wesley Deaconess Order (WDO) at Methodist Union in 1932.²⁹ Until the formal affirmation of the members of the MDO as deacons in an order of ministry, British Methodism had recognised only one order of ministry – the presbyteral.³⁰
- 7.3** Not having had a three-fold pattern of ministry, ordination to the presbyterate has always been direct rather than involving a transitional period as deacon. In 1998, however, the British Methodist Church affirmed that it had received from God a body of people called to focus and represent the servanthood of Christ, exercising a formal role of leadership in the Church, through being both a religious order and an order of ministry.³¹ In recognition of this the Methodist Conference of 1998 received for the first time all its deacons into full connexion. In so doing the Conference authorised the ordination of deacons, thus recognising the diaconate as an order of ministry. Previously they had simply been ordained into the Diaconate of the Universal Church and received into full membership of their religious order. The Reports on the Diaconate leading to the 1998 decision speak of ‘two parallel, complementary and distinctive orders of ministry’ and state that the two ‘are separate and distinct, though complementary’.³² The principle of direct ordination to one of two orders that are each permanent and distinctive continues and is also consolidated in the principles governing candidature by ordained deacons and presbyters offering for the other order of ministry (Standing Order 718).³³ Viewing the two ordained ministries as complementary and distinctive, and those ordained to such ministries as interdependent with all other Methodists, accords with the perichoretic understanding of the Trinity outlined in section 2 above.
- 7.4** The relationship of the MDO to other parts of the British Methodist Church is complex and ever-changing, reflecting its nature both as a religious order and order for diaconal ministry. In essence, however, it is made up of a series of covenant relationships, within the over-arching covenant with God.
- 7.5** The Methodist Conference ordains deacons to exercise a ministry of witness through service in and on behalf of the Church catholic and, by receiving them into Full Connexion, authorises them to do so through the Methodist Church. They thereby enter a covenant relationship with the Conference. Thus in obedience to God’s will and calling deacons are accountable to the Conference for the exercise of their ministry and execution of the Conference’s vision. In turn

²⁹ *The Book of Offices* (1936) includes a service for ‘The Ordination of Deaconesses’, though this ‘ordination’ was not into an order of ministry, but a religious order.

³⁰ Deed of Union Clause 4, as amended 1998 (CPD 2003, pp.213-4).

³¹ The position arrived at through a series of reports in 1993, 1995 and 1997 (*Statements* 2000: 2, pp.291-346).

³² ‘The Methodist Diaconal Order’ (1995) paras. 8 and 13 (*Statements* 2000: 2, pp.317-8).

³³ In both cases they are required to candidate afresh; presbyters cease to be in full connexion as presbyters on commencement of pre-ordination training; deacons cease to be either in full connexion as deacons or members of the MDO. Reinstatement to the original order must be sought if they do not proceed to ordination.

the Conference promises to deploy them all appropriately and to provide them with the resources and support necessary to fulfil their ministry.

- 7.6** At the same time deacons enter a covenant relationship with a dispersed religious order, through being received into full membership of the MDO. The deacon makes a commitment to following a common rule of life of devotion, mutual care and accountability, and to accepting the discipline of the Order. The Order promises to nurture and sustain the deacon throughout life.
- 7.7** A deacon's primary covenant is with God. It is important that the way this covenant is expressed (through relationships with Conference and MDO) brings wholeness and fullness of life. Therefore the various strands of accountability need to be woven together creatively, producing a rich tapestry rather than a patchwork. Accountability to the Methodist Church, via the Conference, as its authorised representatives is vital. When diaconal work is recognised and owned by the Church, then worship and service are connected and the Church is constantly reminded of its calling to serve God in the World.

Yet as a religious Order the MDO retains a degree of moral and organisational autonomy³⁴. This is vital to enable it to offer the prophetic voice. Authentic diaconal ministry involves both a freedom and a responsibility to live on the margins of Church and society in order to challenge both, and to attempt to interpret and connect each to the other.

- 7.8** Wholeness and the integration of varied strands is central to the life and work of a deacon within British Methodism. Collectively and individually deacons show that for Christ's followers life is a whole to be lived with and for him. Daily work and living, solitude and togetherness, activity and rest, personal and social holiness are aspects of the whole. Each aspect is to be interwoven with the other and all is to be offered as worship to God, honouring and serving him wherever the disciple is. Kitchen, communion and arbitration table are all places where nourishment, fellowship, service and the Kingdom of God are found. A Celtic cross is the badge of the MDO. Its use of the circle symbolises how deacons endeavour to hold together the following:

³⁴ Hill's sociological study of religious orders indicates certain characteristic features are involved in fulfilling collective vocation, including i) though part of a Church, the religious order always maintains a certain degree of moral and organisational autonomy, ii) the religious order demands total commitment – considerably more obedience from members than the wider Church demands from either its lay or clergy, iii) the religious order forms a permanent group with its own rituals in which all its members participate (M Hill The Religious Order London: Heinemann Educational 1973).

- 7.8.1** - being representatives of a public ministry and of a religious community, with a shared pattern for shaping daily life (Rule of Life) and commitment to serve those most in need. As its mother house, the MDO 'Centre' gives practical and symbolic expression to this
- 7.8.2** - a personal and communal spiritual life that embraces relationships, use of time, money and gifts along with prayer both individual and corporate
- 7.8.3** - work and worship, service and proclamation, where service is worship when offered in love to others and to God, and when it is sustained by his grace and by prayer
- 7.8.4** - World and Church: deacons characteristically have the roles of connector, interpreter, go-between – acting as both bridge and bridge-builder.
- 8.** The MDO's **Mission Statement** and **Rule of Life** are printed below as a way of understanding the characteristics, tasks and accountability that a deacon endeavours to fulfil.

MISSION STATEMENT³⁵

DIACONAL MINISTRY

is a way of life which expresses the servant ministry of Christ by the whole people of God to the world.

DEACONS

Are men and women called by God to serve in many different ways, offering lifetime commitment, and a willingness to serve where needed.

- Their call is tested by the Church, which ordains them to the Office and work of a deacon in the Church of God.
- They share with the church in its ministry
- They work with people in church and community. They exercise caring, pastoral, evangelistic and outreach ministries. Some are Local Preachers; all are able to be involved in the leading of worship.
- They seek to hold in balance in their ministry; worship, prayer, service and personal relationships.
- They seek to develop a lifestyle and spirituality in keeping with the calling to a servant ministry.

³⁵ Approved by Methodist Diaconal Order Convocation 1997, printed here with one amendment to ensure clarity.

THE METHODIST DIACONAL ORDER

- Is a religious order whose members are ordained to the diaconate as an order of ministry.
- Is a body under the authority and discipline of the Methodist Conference, whose members are selected, trained and appointed to exercise diaconal ministry in partnership with presbyters and laity.
- Is a practical, prophetic and educational expression of this form of ministry which encourages and enables them in their ministry.
- Is a dispersed community living by a rule of life, with a sense of mutual accountability.
- Provides fellowship and encouragement, pastoral care and mutual support, prayer and discipline and opportunities for sharing God's vision.
- Is a sign and a means of diaconal ministry to the church and community.

'Through God's grace our objective is to share in the Church's task of witness, mission and service.'

RULE OF LIFE³⁶

Preface

As a religious Order, we recognise the unconditional love of God as known in Jesus Christ. Out of this springs our calling to the sacrificial servant ministry of Christ and to be a dispersed community living by a rule of life. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we seek to be:

- careful stewards of God's gifts,
- faithful in all relationships,
- and willing servants.

The Order provides the means for: fellowship and encouragement, pastoral care and mutual support, prayer and discipline, and opportunities to explore, celebrate and share in God's purpose and plan. As members of the Order, although diverse, we have a sense of identity and belonging, a mutual responsibility, a shared life of prayer, a common calling and a lifelong commitment, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Rule of Life

We follow this Rule of Life to deepen our fellowship and bind us together as a dispersed community, that we may continue to become the people God wants us to be, both individually and as an Order. This Rule does not bind us in a way that stifles and disables, but is a means by which we might be liberated to find a sense of wholeness in the rhythm of life. There is no element of compulsion in it, but the hope that freely followed and adapted to personal needs and

³⁶ CPD 2003: pp.788-9

circumstances, it will become a framework for the enrichment of our own life, the life of the Order and the people of God amongst whom we live. Every member of the Order is encouraged to adapt the Rule to their own needs and experiences. May it be to us a blessing and joy, and bring glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Devotional Life

We endeavour to:

- attend worship regularly, especially Holy Communion,
- set aside time each day to read the Bible devotionally and to pray, including a time of intercession for members of the Order,
- regularly set aside time for self-examination – a chance to look back and see where we have failed in loving God and our neighbours, and to give thanks for blessings received,
- find a spiritual director/companion, who will accompany, help and affirm us,
- make time each year for a Retreat or Quiet Day.

Discipline

We endeavour to:

- be sensitive to the needs of those close to us, our families, dependants and friends,
- be aware of and relate to, the community in which we live,
- acknowledge and enjoy God's gifts to us of time, talents, money and possessions and through God's grace to be able stewards of these,
- order the rhythm of each day, month and year, to allow for study and relaxation, weekly day off, regular holiday,
- attend Convocation (unless a dispensation is granted),
- participate in the life of area groups wherever possible and attend meetings,
- keep in contact with other members of the Order by the giving or receiving of fellowship and support, by visits, letter or telephone.