

Presbyters and Deacons Affected by Impairment

This report is brought by the Methodist Council after extensive discussions in the Ministerial Committee and in the Connexional Leadership Team of the issues involved. Those discussions have been helped by ministers who are affected by various kinds of impairment. Preliminary consultations have also been held with the Connexional Allowances Committee, whose report elsewhere in the Conference's Agenda includes a proposal to make more funds available to help with these issues.

This preliminary report of what has been done so far is offered to the Conference for information . It represents a start in dealing with a complex and important issue, but it is by no means a finished product. Presbyters and deacons who are affected by some form of impairment and some professionals in the field may still find it inadequate. It is still not clear what it is possible for the Church to do in these areas (irrespective of what it wishes to do). It is proposed to set up a formal working party which includes some presbyters and deacons who are affected by these matters together with some professionals who work in these areas in order to take the matters further.

The Conference is asked to receive the report as part of a process of raising awareness and of developing thinking and good practice about these matters throughout the Connexion.

Theology and practice of presbyteral and diaconal ministry

1. The 2002 Conference adopted a report *What is a Presbyter?* which outlined a re-statement of the nature of the office of presbyter in Methodist tradition and practice. The same Conference also adopted a report *Releasing Ministers for Ministry* which sought to clarify the nature of the relationship between ministers (presbyters) and the Church and thereby to release presbyters to fulfil their vocation, and the Church its calling, more effectively. In doing so it noted that many of the issues were relevant for deacons as well as presbyters. A report entitled *What is a Deacon?* will be brought to the 2004 Conference. That enables material in *Releasing Ministers for Ministry* which outlined the principles underlying the theology and practice of presbyteral ministry to be adapted as follows to cover both presbyters and deacons.

2. The Methodist Conference ordains ministers (presbyters) and deacons to exercise their ministry in and on behalf of the church catholic. 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. Its pattern is the ministry of Christ. This profoundly affects the spirit in which the ministry is exercised, and imparts a distinctive nature to the way in which the core expressions of the particular order of ministry is undertaken.

3. The core expressions of the ministry of a presbyter can be characterised as a **ministry of word** (e.g. formal and informal preaching, evangelism, apologetic, theological and prophetic interpretation, teaching and the articulation of faith and human experience), **sacrament** (e.g. presiding at acts of

celebration and devotion, especially in eucharist, baptism and, in the wider sense of sacramental action, confirmation) and **pastoral responsibility** (e.g. oversight, direction, discipline, order and pastoral care).

4. The core emphasis of the ministry of deacons can 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 and service are highlighted in the diaconal 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.

5. 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 support each other in a shared discipline of the religious life). They therefore enter a covenant relationship with a dispersed religious order, through being received into full membership of the MDO. In this 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.

6. As two parallel and complementary orders of ministry, the Methodist Conference receives into full connexion with itself those who are called to exercise their ministry as presbyters or deacons through the Methodist Church in particular. They are thereby constituted as bodies of presbyters and deacons respectively who enter a covenanting relationship with the Conference. At the heart of these mutual relationships both the presbyters or deacons on the one hand and the Conference on the other have appropriate privileges and responsibilities. Under the will of God the presbyters or deacons are **accountable to** the Conference for the exercise of their ministry and for their execution of the Conference's vision and will. At the same time they are **accounted for** by the Conference in that the Conference is committed to deploying them all appropriately and to providing them with the resources and support necessary for them to fulfil their ministry.

7. The Conference is committed to enabling the Methodist Church to fulfil its calling in response to the needs of God's Kingdom by discerning (amongst other things) how its presbyters and deacons may best be deployed in the light of their individual gifts and circumstances. At the same time all Methodist presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full connexion are called to fulfil their ministry by

responding wherever they are most required (in the collective view of the Church expressed through the Conference) to meet those same needs.

8. As people who represent the Conference, all Methodist presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full connexion share **a collegial responsibility** for embodying, exercising and sharing with others (lay and ordained) the Conference's oversight of the church both as it gathers in Christian community and as it disperses in the world for worship and mission. They are deployed as individuals to enact this collegial responsibility. To this end they are all stationed by the Conference, some within particular appointments, others without appointment or with permission to study. Wherever possible they should all be linked together with other presbyters and deacons in teams for mutual supervision and support.

9. All Methodist presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full connexion therefore represent both the *catholic* and the *apostolic* nature of the Church. In being stationed they are all sent to particular situations to bring the goals, insights and resources of the wider church to bear on them, as well as to exercise their particular gifts and skills. All Methodist presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full connexion are therefore **stationed under common disciplines**. This means that there should be single processes of stationing for all presbyters and all deacons respectively in the light of the overall needs and resources (lay and ordained) of the church, with equivalent procedures for people in each of the various types of appointment. Some appointments are based in circuits (but also need to look to the wider church and world), whilst others are based in other institutions in the church or world (but also need to look to the circuits). Some appointments are in the control of the Conference (e.g. those in circuits, theological colleges, and the connexional team), whilst others are not (e.g. those in other denominations or secular agencies).

10. All processes of stationing should be marked by

- Common commitment to the requirements of the Kingdom;
- Respect for the perceived needs of both the presbyters and deacons respectively and of the situations requiring their ministry, and at the same time a critical engagement with them both;
- Transparency about motives and all material factors affecting the process.

11. Recent experimentation with a greater variety of patterns of presbyteral and diaconal ministry has begun to open many people's eyes to different ways of being ordained people from those acknowledged in the past. The expectations placed on presbyters and deacons by people in circuits have often tended to be conventional and uniform and failed to take into account what individuals have to offer. A variety of patterns of working have now been acknowledged and honoured by the church. Different styles of ministry, together with the varied gifts of presbyters and deacons, open up more exciting possibilities than we have ever dreamed of in the past. As the church dies and re-emerges into new patterns of being there is a need to broaden our understanding of the way in which ordained presbyters and deacons will work in exercising the core emphases of their respective ministries - some on the edge of the conventional, others in the heart of it, some to head up social projects, others to develop the prayer and spiritual well-being of the gathered and disparate communities that come to us to discover deeper

meaning in their lives. Diversity of ministries (both presbyteral and diaconal) is therefore a strength and not a weakness of our emerging church.

12. At the same time all presbyters and deacons have varied gifts. All have strengths and weaknesses. Some are good at administration and leading worship, others thrive on pastoral care or prophetic insights. Ordination marks the call of a complex, human being with all those gifts and weaknesses into the service of the church. Each of us is incomplete. God calls incomplete people, by grace, into his service.

13. In the course of anyone's presbyteral or diaconal ministry different skills will develop whilst others are neglected. No one totally fits the expectations of the church and also lives a life of prophetic action and care. All presbyters and deacons do their best and live faithfully in the tension between their calling and their inability to be everything to everybody.

Towards enabling rather than disabling presbyters and deacons

14. It is against the above framework of understanding that the position of those presbyters and deacons who are sometimes referred to as being affected by some 'disability' needs to be reconsidered. What has been described as 'disability' is often an inappropriate word to describe the journey into a new way of being experienced by a presbyter or deacon (or a candidate for one of those two orders of ministry). 'Disability' should not be an excuse for pushing presbyters and deacons into redundancy. The inability to walk may lead to the enhanced ability to hold people within the ministry of prayer. The inability to see might be the means of developing a listening and healing ministry.

15. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 defines disability as:

A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Paragraph 4(1) of Schedule 1 to the Act provides that:

An impairment is to be taken to affect the ability of the person concerned to carry out normal day-to-day activities if it affects one of the following:

(a) mobility; (b) manual dexterity; (c) physical co-ordination; (d) continence; (e) ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects; (f) speech, hearing or eyesight; (g) memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand; or (h) perception of risk of physical danger.

The Coalitions of Disabled people have produced the following definitions in outlining a Social Model of disability:

Impairment : *'Lacking part or all of a limb or defective limb organism or mechanism of the body. An individual's physical, psychological or emotional make-up which differs from the norm.'*

Disability: *'The disadvantage of restriction of activity caused by a social organisation, which takes little or no account of people who have impairments, and thus excludes them from taking part in the mainstream of social activities. Disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression.'*

16. The key term for the Church should be that of impairment. A Church that seeks to live according to the gospel will seek the grace to cease being or avoid becoming a form of social oppression. That raises sharp questions of how the Church seeks to deal with those presbyters or deacons who are in some respects impaired, or become so. In recent years we have come to recognise that we select people not for a job but for the office of presbyter or deacon. We do so not by referring to a job description but by looking for particular behavioural characteristics. Those accepted as candidates then move to a period of education and training in which the principal goal is the formation of their being into that of a presbyter or deacon. This involves the development of a basic competence through the internalisation of particular values and predispositions. It is only as we look to deploy them that a particular job description becomes relevant. This can be broken down into a set of competencies which a particular presbyter or deacon needs to have to perform the role.

17. One problem that we have is that we are not good enough at defining the competencies required in particular appointments. This leads to two related issues. On the one hand Circuits and other bodies may sometimes have expectations of a presbyter or deacon which they do not articulate either to themselves or to the presbyters and deacons concerned. On the other hand, a Circuit may feel that a presbyter or deacon is no longer able to fulfil the requirements of the ministry in that particular situation but not say so whilst the presbyter or deacon simply soldiers on. We also need to be aware of the situation where someone becomes increasingly impaired with regard to fulfilling the duties which they formerly undertook and so has to relinquish some of them which then have to be taken on by already over-burdened colleagues. This can be an embarrassment for the presbyter or deacon concerned, and though other staff may be willing to help, Circuit Stewards may become concerned about the health of those taking on that extra workload. This is especially so in Circuits with a small staff. Although it could be hoped that in most cases help could be provided from adjoining Circuits or local supernumeraries, it may not always be possible, and District Chairs can feel helpless in not being able to provide an answer.

18. Another problem is that most funding for appointments comes from circuits. Where presbyters or deacons find themselves impaired so far as the expected duties of particular appointments are concerned, often the only way to find the funding to house and support them and make it possible for them to continue their ministry in new ways is to make them "Supernumerary" and draw on the appropriate funds that exist for Supernumeraries. Yet becoming "Supernumerary" is liable to create the impression that they no longer have or no longer wish to exercise a ministry, or that the Church considers them to be marginalised and therefore less valuable contributors to its life and mission.

19. The report of the Connexional Allowances Committee to the Conference of 2004 includes a proposal to widen the objectives of the Auxiliary Fund to obviate the problems outlined in paragraph 18 above, and to ensure that presbyters and deacons affected by impairment continue to be valued and are

enabled to continue exercising their ministry either in their current appointments or in some other, rather than being seen predominately as the recipients of ministry. (See Proposal 1 below.)

20. Another way in which presbyters and deacons affected by impairment could be affirmed in their continuing ministry would be for them to remain on the same mailing lists as other presbyters and deacons, and remain in the Accompanied Self-Appraisal programme, through which continuing reflection on and working through each person's situation and experiences could take place. In these cases the accompanist would probably need more specialised training. (See Proposal 2.)

21. In dealing with all of the above issues the pastoral needs and insights of the presbyter's or deacon's spouse or primary carer or both must not be overlooked. (See Proposal 3.)

22. If it is deemed appropriate for the presbyter or deacon concerned to change the type of their appointment or to retire early, the matter must be sensitively handled. For many it would be a traumatic experience to have to face such a radical and unwelcome change in their ministry. Communications from the Medical Committee or other parties to the discussion should be copied to the Secretary of the Conference and the relevant Chair, who will ensure that the Superintendent and others provide appropriate support. The Chair will already have been involved in talking things through with all the parties.

23. Where appropriate the presbyter or deacon should be encouraged, with their spouse or primary carer or both, to attend some course or similar event to help them make any necessary transitions. This would have the effect not only of helping the presbyter or deacon concerned to feel included, but also of keeping before the Connexion the special needs of such presbyters and deacons.

24. The presbyter or deacon should also be encouraged to have a support group. Formal sources of pastoral care include the local circuit minister, the circuit Superintendent, the Chair of District and the Connexion. Informally some have found members of the local congregation a source of wisdom and support, and such people should be affirmed. However, the local presbyter and superintendent may go through their entire ministry without having within their remit the care of a presbyter or deacon who is affected by any form of impairment. Almost every District Chair, however, will, as the pastoral care of the ordained ministers within the District is part of the Chair's remit. The matter and issues involved should therefore be discussed in the Chairs' Meeting, and thereafter included in the induction process for new Chairs. Chairs should then ensure that appropriate help is provided for presbyters and deacons affected by impairment, and for their relevant ordained colleagues and Superintendents.

25. While appreciating the need of the Housing Society to have rules relating to able-bodied Ministers, the position regarding presbyters and deacons affected by impairment or their spouses or primary carers (or both) ought to be decided on a case by case basis, as needs will vary greatly, both in terms of the provision and of the capital threshold. (See Proposal 4.)

26. Receipt of information about help available in the Connexion (including the Housing Society) and from state provision seems to be patchy. (See Proposal 5.)

27. We have been looking at the needs of presbyters and deacons who have become impaired during the course of their ministry. We have not looked at issues surrounding candidacy for ordained ministry by people affected by impairment. (See Proposal 6.)

28. There should be a named lead person in the Connexional Team who deals with issues of impairment. In some cases the Church will be one agency among others involved with the minister, and there may be areas in which the Church should consult the others, with the minister's permission. A named lead person will be able to ensure that such consultations are co-ordinated. She or he should also make contact with our ecumenical partners to discover their experience of handling these matters and any examples of good practice which they have to offer. (See Proposal 7.)

29. Newly disabled ministers have a journey before them that they should not only be encouraged to make, but be enabled to make. (See Proposal 8.)

Hopefully some of the suggestions and proposals in this paper will help with that process.

PROPOSALS for further work

1. That a formal working party be established to take these matters further. Such a group should include some presbyters and deacons who are affected by impairment together with some professionals who work in these areas. As part of its task, the group should carefully scrutinise the Disability Discrimination Act to see what further issues may have to be dealt with. It should be recognised that whereas matters of accessibility to church buildings seem to have been taken seriously by local churches, attention still needs to be paid to the ways in which "employers" may best enable people affected by impairment to work and to look positively at the options that are open to them.
2. That the presbyter or deacon be supported with the opportunity to remain in the Accompanied Self-Appraisal system. It is recognised that in most cases accompanists would need some specialised training, to which disabled ministers and people with relevant expertise should contribute.
3. That the pastoral and practical needs of presbyters and deacons affected by impairment, their spouses and carers, be part of the induction process for Chairs of Districts.
4. That the Chief Executive of the Housing Society be invited to discuss policy relating to presbyters and deacons affected by impairment, and that there be at least two such presbyters and deacons at that meeting. It would be helpful to have a preparatory paper setting out the issues and the questions that need asking.
5. That an information pack be produced outlining current State provision for people affected by impairment, and help available from church sources; and that the pack be updated each year and new information sent to all presbyters and deacons concerned annually. Included in that information should be details of how much may be earned in early retirement.

6. That Training Institutions be consulted about their experience in training with people affected by impairment, and about any insights into matters of significance in the areas of theology and spirituality that may have emerged, including the place of pain in Christian pilgrimage.
7. That we seek to discover the experience of other churches, here and abroad, and examples of good practice in matters relating to presbyters and deacons affected by impairment.
8. That the term "Junior Supernumerary" be dispensed with.

A DRAFT CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

1. The presbyter or deacon who is or who has become affected by impairment is someone whom the church has affirmed as having a vocation and ministry to fulfil. The church shall seek to put into place strategies of pastoral care, informed understanding and practical assistance in the variety of workplaces to enable this to continue to be so.

2. As with all aspects of any presbyter's or deacon's future, the presbyter or deacon affected by impairment and his or her spouse or primary carer if there is one, should be consulted firsthand about any matter that may affect them.

3. To assist in the process of discerning a new pattern of ministry, the presbyter or deacon concerned, the circuit, district and those charged under Standing Order 781 with handling the discussions of the initial deployment of presbyters and deacons and the subsequent reviews of their deployment should together seek answers to the following questions:

- What could it mean for the presbyter or deacon, within their new circumstances, to live out the life-long vocation to ordained ministry?
- How can God best be served in the particular situation?
- How can the skills, training and experience of the presbyter and deacon be best used in the current or some other appointment?
- What new skills or training may be needed?
- How can the presbyter or deacon be affirmed, valued and accountable?
- What will it mean for the presbyter's or deacon's circuit and district to enable and support these changes?
- What physical changes might be needed to the presbyter's or deacon's environment and working conditions to make it possible for her or him to continue in the current appointment? Or what assistance in terms of people, equipment, resources would make it possible for him or her to continue working as a presbyter or deacon in some other appointment?

The answers to some of these questions can only come with time and through further discovery of the nature of the impairment or illness. Flexibility belongs to the nature of this process.

4. An appropriately experienced person should be appointed to serve as a mentor or enabler to facilitate the processes in 3 above. (This could be a lay person with professional experience of such matters or another appropriate presbyter or deacon.)

5. To guard against a feeling of isolation or of being marginalised, the presbyter or deacon concerned should be invited to continue in the Accompanied Self-Appraisal scheme irrespective of whether she or he retires early. The Chair of District should ensure that a mentor or enabler is appointed who will work with the presbyter or deacon concerned to set up a personal support group as appropriate. The mentor or enabler should ensure that the Chair and Superintendent are informed of the outcome of this process. Every effort should be made for presbyters and deacons to continue in contact with professional colleagues both circuit and ecumenical. They should remain on all the mailing lists for presbyters and deacons unless they request otherwise.

6. If it is deemed appropriate for the presbyter or deacon concerned to change the type of their appointment or to retire early, the matter must be sensitively handled. For many it would be a traumatic experience to have to face such a radical and unwelcome change in their ministry. Communications from the Medical Committee or other parties to the discussion should be copied to the Secretary of the Conference and the relevant Chair, who will ensure that the Superintendent and others provide appropriate support. The Chair will already have been involved in talking things through with all the parties.

7. Provision needs to be made for the presbyter or deacon concerned and any spouse or primary carer (or both) to face and work through the profound issues raised by this major life transition.

A full, sensitive and co-ordinated discussion concerning future housing and financial needs of the presbyter or deacon, partner (and, where appropriate, family) must take place in a location that is convenient for the presbyter or deacon concerned. Accurate information relating to Methodist financial arrangements, health and social benefits and any other appropriate resources should be made available in writing and discussed during a visit from an authorised person.

8. Having to make radical and unwelcome changes in one's patterns of ministry, and coping with a possible sense of guilt in putting extra burdens on colleagues and on the Circuit if major alterations are needed in housing, can be hard for the presbyter or deacon to come to terms with and need sensitive handling by all involved. This is also true for spouses and carers whose pastoral and practical needs should be borne in mind.

At the same time the presbyter or deacon affected by impairment can bring significant insights and other gifts through their impairment. Colleagues, lay and ordained, may need to be helped to recognise that there are other forms of ministry and that the presbyter or deacon affected by impairment brings complementary gifts.

RESOLUTION

27/1 The Conference receives the Report.