

29. The Covenant Relationship for those who are Ordained and in Full Connexion

This paper originated in a request from the Law and Polity Committee for a positive policy statement about the status of those who are ordained and in full connexion with the Conference. It also provides the background to the proposed Handbook for Presbyters and Deacons and the report of the Stationing Review Group.

The Methodist Council has approved its submission to the Conference as a consultation document to be sent for discussion and comment to Circuits, Districts and other interested parties.

Introduction

1. In Methodist understanding, both those who are ordained (i.e. presbyters and deacons) and the Church itself are in forms of covenant relationship with God. In both cases this relationship is made possible by God. Its origin lies in God's gracious offer to Israel which is summarised in the Hebrew scriptures as "I will be their God and they shall be my people".¹ This offer is then seen to extend beyond the people called Israel to all women and men. The New Testament sees this extension fulfilled in particular in Jesus Christ, who also provides the supreme example of what it is to live in such a relationship with God.²
2. A covenant relationship therefore primarily involves the corporate life of the community of God's people (i.e. Israel; the Body of Christ; the Church). It is concerned with individuals (e.g. Christian disciples in general, not just those disciples who happen to be ordained) within that group. In every case there is an initial calling for the parties concerned to accept the relationship with God; and a continuing calling for them to allow themselves to be transformed by God as the relationship develops, and for them to become what God wills them to be.³
3. What God offers is a loving relationship. A covenant relationship is not therefore a contract in which God and human beings agree to provide particular goods and services for each other. It is not something that individual human beings or the Church have to do to create a relationship with God. God has freely and graciously already made it possible. Rather, the covenant is the means of grace by which they accept the relationship, freely offer to reciprocate it and then seek to sustain it. It is therefore not so much concerned with *getting into* a relationship with God as it is with *staying in* it. It is not about *acquiring* a relationship with God, but *living within* the loving relationship that God has already offered.

1 e.g. Leviticus 26:12, Jeremiah 31:33.

2 e.g. Romans chapters 8 to 11, 1 Corinthians 10:25, Galatians 3:28.

3 Philippians 3: 7-16 is a classic statement of this in the New Testament.

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4. The covenant is therefore not so much a contract as a means of grace operating within a loving relationship. That fact sets a clear and distinctive framework for the ways in which the notion of calling and any related concept of accountability are to be understood within it. The initial and continuing callings within the covenant relationship represent the free offering and sustaining of commitments rather than a process of setting out obligations and demanding that they are fulfilled. The one who calls people to accept a relationship and then to allow it to develop also expresses a commitment to care for them and to remain constant in doing so. The one who responds and reciprocates is similarly expressing a commitment to care for the well-being, and to fulfil the wishes and vision of the one who calls.⁴

The Church as the Covenant People of God

5. So far as the covenant relationship between God and the Church is concerned, the **calling of the Methodist Church**⁵, like that of other Christian Churches, **is to respond to the Gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.**⁶ In so doing, the Church inherits Israel's mantle of being the "Covenant People of God".⁷ The New Testament writers saw the Church as developing from the life and worship of the children of Israel. Whether the Church is to be seen in this as replacing Israel as God's covenant community (as some New Testament passages might be seen to imply) or as sharing the status with Israel (as other passages might be seen to imply) is not material to this discussion. In either case, the

4 In the Hebrew scriptures, Hosea shows how God does not give up on offering the chance of relationship to Israel; and the Prophets and the Psalmist often plead for God to behave according to God's nature.

5 The Statement of Purpose quoted here was adopted by the 1996 Conference. Since then the 1999 Conference has adopted a major statement entitled *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice*; the 2000 Conference has adopted the fruits of a programme of reflection and dialogue entitled *Our Calling*; continuing dialogue led to discussion at the 2003 Conference of a report entitled *Where are we Heading?*; and after a further process of consultation the 2004 Conference adopted *Priorities for the Methodist Church*.

6 If the Church is responding to this calling, its outlook is **global** and **ecumenical**. Fixing its eye on worship and mission, it holds **discipleship** in balance with **apostleship**, and **holiness** in balance with **witness**. Its common life has a rhythm of coming and going in which it is gathered around the Word and the Sacraments, and scattered in evangelism, social caring, the struggle for justice and concern for the integrity of creation. Through a sharing of resources, both material and spiritual, it becomes a community where worth and love are received from God, offered to God and mediated to others. [These phrases are adapted from the opening theological statement in the *Restructuring Report of the 1993 Conference (Agenda pp. 802-4)*, a statement that in turn collates and rehearses many earlier reports and statements.] At the centre of the Church's activity, therefore, are the twin aspects of **worship** and **mission**. Above all else the Church is called to worship God and to share in God's mission in the world. It is called to be **one**, seeking unity with God and within its own life, reflecting the rich diversity of being and grace within the oneness of God and realising it in the world. It is called to be **holy**, turned towards God in worship and discipleship, belonging to God in its inner dynamic and showing the marks of Christ in the outward expressions of its life. It is called to be **catholic**, seeking the redemption of the whole world and therefore sharing an authentic, common life in behaviour and belief with all God's people throughout history in this world and the next. It is called to be **apostolic**, turned towards the world in mission and witness, and thereby sustaining continuity with Jesus, his apostles and their successors through faithfulness to Christ, to his Gospel and to his call to be agents of God's love in the world in the fellowship of the Spirit. [For these marks of what it is to be the Church, see further *Called to Love and Praise Section 2.4.*]

7 For this and what follows, see further paragraphs 2.2.1 to 2.2.10 of *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (1999).

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Church becomes a “new covenant” community within God’s covenant people, a “new covenant” that is “sealed by Jesus’s blood” (1 Corinthians 11.25; Luke 22.20).

The idea of covenant has had a special place in the thinking of the Methodist people since John Wesley first urged them to renew their covenant with God. In the light of the emphasis on grace and obedience in the understanding of covenant, the distinctive Methodist emphases, on God’s grace and on holiness, commitment and social action, place Methodism firmly within the tradition of the covenant people.⁸

6. Methodism has always insisted that any concern for the individual in Christian faith and discipleship, or for what is personal or for the “inner life”, should be balanced by an emphasis on the community of fellowship, the social nature of holiness and the common or collective offering of worship. Methodist understanding of what it is to be the Church is therefore that of a corporate calling and discipleship. Within that corporate experience individuals discover that their own covenant relationships with God find a natural home, and that they are nurtured and called to develop their own expressions of discipleship.

The special calling of the Ordained in the Covenant Community of Disciples

7. So far as the covenant relationship between God and those who are ordained is concerned,

It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit the grace and the fruit which indicate those whom He has chosen.

Those whom the Methodist Church recognises as called of God and therefore receives into its ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church’s recognition of the minister’s personal call.....

All Methodist preachers are examined tested and approved before they are authorised to minister in holy things.⁹

The 1974 Conference report on *Ordination* comments further on this concept of a calling to ordained ministry as follows:

Such a call in no way abrogates the call to be Christ in the world which comes to the whole people of God. This applies equally to ministers and lay[people]. [People] are not called out of the Church to be a minister. What [they receive] is a special calling within a general calling. Such a special calling (to the ordained ministry) must be distinguished from other special callings (to many differing occupations) which are received within the general calling of the people of God.¹⁰

8 *Called to Love and Praise* para. 2.2.9.

9 Clause 4 of the Deed of Union.

10 *Ordination* Conference Statement 1974 para 11. The words in square brackets provide equivalent terms to what would now be considered to be sexist connotations in the original.

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8. When the Deed was written, British Methodism had recognised only one order of ministry within the Church, namely that of the presbyter, but the basic principles are applicable to deacons as well. The Deed is seeking to define the relationship between those who are ordained and the whole Church. Some further extracts from Clause 4 are as follows:

Christ's ministers in the church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation and have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides his gifts severally as he wills....

The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs to a particular order or class of people, but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised...

For the sake of church order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments.

9. The report *What is a Presbyter?* adopted by the Conference in 2002 comments on these further extracts as follows (para. 2):

*Put negatively, the Deed of Union is keen to prevent particular types of understanding of priesthood or a priestly caste being applied to Methodist ministers and, by inference, particular types of understanding of what it is to be a church being applied to the Methodist connexion. Put positively, it suggests that being a minister (presbyter) and acting as such is a particular form or expression of a **vocation** or **calling** to **discipleship**. This general vocation or calling to become women and men of God constantly growing into the full stature of Christ is shared by all those who constitute the Church. As such, the ministry of presbyters is interdependent with all other forms of ministry (lay or ordained) within the ministry of the whole people of God. Neither the ministry of presbyters nor the ministry of the whole people of God can be dissolved in favour of the other. Neither can be said to have priority over the other. Each requires the other.*

10. This sense of a special calling of the ordained within a general calling to discipleship is developed in the 1974 Statement on *Ordination* by expounding the reference in the *Deed of Union* to a concept of "representative selection". The Statement begins explicitly with the Church's calling to exercise discipleship in worship and mission and goes on to say:

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.... 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 focussed 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.¹¹

11. In Methodist understanding, the general calling to discipleship within which the special calling to ordained ministry occurs is a vital aspect of the covenant relationship with God that is expressed through the Covenant Service.

A secondary covenant relationship between those who are ordained and the Church

12. There is therefore a covenant relationship between God and the Church, and another between God and those who are ordained. But those who are ordained also relate to the Church and *vice versa*. If a summary of the marks of the Church is that it is where *the word is duly preached, the sacraments duly administered, and the people duly formed in mission and discipleship*¹², then they are matched by the Methodist Church's statement that presbyteral ministry is a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility.¹³ Similarly, if the marks of the Church engaging authentically in mission are *witness and service*¹⁴, then they are matched by the Methodist Church's statement that diaconal ministry is a ministry of witness through service.¹⁵
13. Moreover, within each of the primary covenant relationships (between God and those who are ordained, and between God and the Church) there is both an initial calling to accept the relationship, and a continuing calling to be transformed by God as the relationship develops. In each case the initial and continuing calling comes from God, but is often mediated through other parties. A primary (but not exclusive) way in which the initial and continuing calling comes to the ordained is by it being mediated through the Church. Similarly, those who are ordained are a vitally important (but not exclusive) means of mediating God's calling to people to be the Church; in other words, to become the people of God and the body of Christ in the world. In terms of

11 1974 Conference Statement *Ordination* para 14.

12 For the marks of the Church, see paragraph 4 and footnote 5 above. The first and second parts of this formulation (i.e. "the word..... the sacraments....") are inherited from the Anglican tradition, where it is to be found in Hooker and in Article XIX of the 39 Articles. The third part ("the people...") is a Methodist extension of it, in which "discipleship" carries both its New Testament meanings of "learning" and "following".

13 For these core emphases of presbyteral ministry, see para 6 of the report *What is a Presbyter?* adopted by the Conference in 2002, and Standing Order 700(1).

14 The Porvoo statement signed by Anglican Churches in Britain and Ireland and eight Nordic and Baltic national Churches declares that each of the churches involved "as a whole has maintained an authentic apostolic succession of witness and service". Similarly, a joint statement from a meeting of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope in November 2006 stated that the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches "share a common witness and service".

15 For these core emphases of diaconal ministry, see Section 5 of the report *What is a Deacon?* adopted by the Conference in 2004, and Standing Order 701(1).

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accountability, this means that the Church's prime commitment is to God and it is primarily accountable to God. But it is also accountable to those who are ordained and who mediate God's calling to it; and it is therefore committed to them as well. Similarly, the primary commitment and accountability of those who are ordained is to God. But they are also accountable to the Church which mediates God's calling to it; and are therefore committed to it as well.

14. There is therefore a secondary covenant relationship between those who are ordained and the Church. In Methodist understanding this covenant relationship is characterised as presbyters and deacons being "ordained and in full connexion" with the Conference (which is the supreme governing body of the Methodist Church under God). Ordination and "reception into full connexion" are linked inseparably in Methodism, and both are essential in the making of a Methodist presbyter and deacon: in general terms, if ordination relates to a presbyter's or deacon's status and role in the Church catholic, reception into Full Connexion concerns his or her particular relationship to the Methodist Church.¹⁶

*The Methodist Conference ordains ministers (presbyters) [sc. and deacons] to exercise their ministry in and on behalf of the Church catholic..... The Methodist Conference receives into Full Connexion with itself those who are called to exercise their ministry through the Methodist Church in particular.*¹⁷

15. 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. They in turn enter a covenant relationship with the Conference and are thereby constituted as bodies of presbyters and deacons respectively. 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.¹⁸

16. This covenant relationship is outlined in the Standing Orders relating to Presbyteral and Diaconal Ministry in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church (SO 700 and 701) as follows:

By receiving persons into full connexion as Methodist presbyters/deacons the Conference enters into a covenant relationship with them in which they are held accountable by the church in respect of their presbyteral/diaconal ministry

16 This sentence is drawn from footnote 5 of the report *What is a Presbyter?* adopted by the Conference in 2002.

17 Paragraphs 4.1 and 4.2 of the report *Releasing Ministers for Ministry* adopted by the Conference in 2002.

18 Paragraphs 15, 17, 19-20 and 23 of this report are based on paragraphs 4.2, 4.3, 4.5, 4.7, and 4.8 of *Releasing Ministers for Ministry* 2002.

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and Christian discipleship, and are accounted for by the Church in respect of their deployment and the support they require for their ministry. (SO 700(2)/701(2))

17. The Conference is therefore 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. Standing Order 740 expresses all this as follows:¹⁹

740 Connexion with the Conference.

(1) (a) Ministers admitted into full connexion or recognised and regarded as such enter into a covenant relationship with the Conference as laid down in Standing Order 700. In this relationship they accept a common discipline of stationing and collegially exercise pastoral responsibility for the Church on behalf of the Conference in the stations to which they are appointed, working in collaboration with others, in the courts of the church and individually, who bear proper responsibilities in those situations.

(b) Deacons admitted into full connexion or recognised and regarded as such enter into a covenant relationship with the Conference as laid down in Standing Order 701. In this relationship they accept a common discipline of stationing and collegially exercise servant ministry in the Church, collaborating with others and sharing in the leadership of the pastoral care, worship and mission in the stations to which they are appointed. In addition they undertake the privileges and responsibilities of membership of the Methodist Diaconal Order as a dispersed religious order.

(2) Ministers and deacons admitted into full connexion or recognised and regarded as such are required to uphold the authority of the Conference in the life of the church and to observe its discipline. To this end they shall study its proceedings, loyally carry out its directions and make its decisions known. When appointed to do so they shall attend its sessions and take part in its deliberations. Deacons, as members of a dispersed religious order, shall also attend the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order.

.....
^{20 21}

19 In this particular instance as in Standing Orders generally the term "minister" identifies what is in many contexts known as a "presbyter" as opposed to a "deacon" (although the term "ministry" is used with reference to presbyters and deacons, and also to lay-people). Consultations are under way in 2007-8 about whether steps should be taken to resolve this anomaly both in formal documents and popular language and, if so, how it should be achieved.

20 The relevant passages from Standing Orders 700 and 701 referred to in (1)(a) and (1)(b) of this Standing Order can be found quoted in paragraph 16 above.

21 Standing Order 740 goes on to describe some of those who exercise a form of ministry in and on behalf of the Methodist Church, but who are not in a full covenant relationship with it (i.e. are not in full connexion with the Conference):

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18. What is meant in S.O. 740(1)(a) above by ministers (presbyters) collegially exercising “pastoral responsibility for the Church on behalf of the Conference” is spelled out further in S.O. 700(3) and (7), and S.O. 520 (1) and (2).

700 (3) Ministers in the active work exercise their ministry, including pastoral responsibility, primarily in the setting in which they are stationed, whether full-time or part-time, and whether or not the appointment is directly within the control of the Church.

....
(7) Pastoral charge in a Circuit is exercised by those ministers in the active work who are appointed by the Conference to that Circuit; sharing with others, in the courts of the church and individually, the exercise of the particular responsibilities and ministries involved, they have oversight on behalf of the Conference of the worship, pastoral care and mission policy of the Circuit and its constituent Local Churches in accordance with Methodist discipline.

520 Responsibilities. (1) The minister or ministers appointed to the several Circuits are appointed by the Conference to preach and exercise pastoral charge in those Circuits on behalf of the Conference as set out in Standing Order 700(7). In so doing they shall exercise their particular responsibilities in conjunction with those of the appropriate courts and lay officers in the Circuit to which they are appointed and in the constituent Local Churches of that Circuit. With them they shall act in accordance with Standing Orders 515, 531, 614 and 633²² to uphold Methodist discipline and to exercise oversight of the worship, pastoral care and mission policy of the Circuit, and the allocation of specific pastoral work and responsibilities to particular ministers, deacons and lay officers.

(2) It is the duty of the Superintendent appointed to each Circuit to enable the relevant courts, officers, deacons and ministers to fulfil their specific responsibilities under Standing Order and to ensure that they do so.

19. As people who represent the Conference, all Methodist presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full connexion therefore 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

740 (3) Probationer ministers and deacons, although not in full connexion, are required to uphold the authority of the Conference in the life of the church and to observe its discipline. To this end they shall study its proceedings, loyally carry out its directions and make its decisions known.

(4) Persons (sc. of other Churches) authorised to serve as ministers or deacons in accordance with Standing Order 733 are invited to take part in the wider life of the church as far as their circumstances allow and Standing Orders permit.

²² These Standing Orders deal respectively with the responsibilities of the Circuit Meeting, Circuit Stewards, Church Council and Church Stewards.

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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.

20. 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.
21. Methodist ministers (presbyters) and, more recently, deacons have historically embodied this model of ministry through being what is termed 'itinerant'. Originally, those who were received into full connexion were to be itinerant preachers who were sent to travel to a particular region and then exercise a ministry of visitation on behalf of the Conference around a particular 'circuit'. They were to be 'extraordinary messengers' helping people to discern the needs of the Kingdom in new situations. They were not meant to emulate or replace the residential or parochial clergy, although as Methodism gradually separated from the Church of England and the various Methodist denominations came into being ministers had to adopt some aspects of that role.²³
22. Although there were some in the early years who attempted to be 'half-time' itinerants, on the whole those who for financial or other reasons were not able to travel away from home full-time had to remain as local preachers and were not received into full connexion. To some these developments have always seemed to be deviations from itinerancy, which increasingly came to be understood over the years more in terms of particular terms and conditions of service (i.e. full-time stipendiary ministry) than of a particular model of ministry. But in recent times a growing number of ministers and deacons have found themselves restricted in their availability for stationing due to the educational, medical or employment needs of their families. Many have entered ordained ministry in later life when they have already developed settled commitments. Some have wished to remain in their own houses, or only been able to work part-time. This has led to a reaffirmation of the model of those who are ordained being 'extra-ordinary messengers' in the Church and the world and, through travelling and visiting, exercising a ministry of oversight (in the case of presbyters) and of leadership in witness and service (in the case of deacons) in the appointments to which they are sent. This in turn requires both the Church and those whom it ordains and receives into full connexion to allow their own needs and gifts to be put into the context of the wider needs of the Kingdom, and to allow them to be modified by those wider needs if necessary. John Wesley told his helpers "Go always, not only to those who want (i.e. need) you, but to those who want (i.e. need) you most". He would also have wanted the Conference to "Send the ministers always, not only to those who need them, but to those who need them most". The model of what it is to be a Methodist presbyter or deacon living and

²³ This and the following paragraph are based on the section entitled "Renewing Itinerancy" in the report *Releasing Ministers for Ministry* adopted by the Conference in 2002.

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serving within the covenant relationship that is being in full connexion with the Conference is primary and so takes precedence over the different types of appointment and particular terms and conditions of service.

23. All Methodist presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full connexion are therefore **stationed under a common discipline**. This means that there is a single process of stationing for all presbyters and all deacons respectively in light of the overall needs and resources (lay and ordained) of the Church, with equivalent procedures for those serving 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 in particular, and to the British Connexion in general). Some appointments are in the direct control of the Conference (e.g. those in Circuits, theological colleges, and the Connexional Team), whilst others are not (e.g. those in partner Churches overseas, other denominations or secular agencies).²⁴ In the language of Standing Orders, those in appointments within the direct control of the Conference are said to be “appointed to serve in them”; whereas those in appointments that are not in the direct control of the Conference are said to be “permitted or authorised to serve in them”. In the case of the latter, the performance of the presbyter or deacon in the role in which she or he is permitted to serve is subject to the control of the church, institution or agency concerned, but he or she is still accountable to the Conference for his or her overall character and vocation as a presbyter or deacon.²⁵
24. As well as various types of appointments, there are various types of terms and conditions of service. So far as those stationed in appointments that are not within the control of the Methodist Church are concerned, the terms and conditions under which they serve are those of the church, institution or agency concerned. For those who are stationed in appointments within the control of the Church, there is a range of possibilities. In some circumstances where presbyters or deacons are only able to offer limited availability to the Conference for their stationing, their terms and conditions of service may not include the provision of a stipend or a manse. In general, however, where presbyters and deacons make themselves available for stationing, the Conference fulfils its commitment to provide a stipend and a manse and other

24 For presbyters, see Standing Order 700(11) [S.O. 701(11) makes a similar statement about deacons]:

(11) In its accounting for its ministers and probationers the Conference stations them annually. Some it appoints to serve in Circuits or Districts or in connexional office, others to serve as chaplains or as mission partners with other conferences and churches. Others are authorised to serve in appointments not directly within the control of the Church; each is stationed in a Circuit, where they are called to share the insights of their particular ministry with the persons who are appointed to or are members in the Circuit. Others again are stationed as supernumeraries, without appointment or with permission to study.

25 For example, Standing Order 735 sets this out with reference to those who are given permission to serve another Conference or Church as follows:

735 (4) Permission may be given on terms that the minister or deacon will be accountable to the other conference or church both for his or her ministerial or diaconal practice and for his or her general vocation and development as a minister or deacon and, through that conference or church, to the Conference, if such terms are agreed by the Conference and the conference or church concerned.

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benefits, even if a suitable appointment cannot be found for them in the short term.

25. Presbyters and deacons can also be given permission to alter their terms and conditions of service and become “Supernumeraries”. This means that they are not counted in the numbers of those appointed to serve in circuit, district or connexional appointments, chaplaincies, appointments not directly within the control of the Church, or mission partnerships; or of those given permission to serve another Conference or Church, or to study or to be without appointment (normally at their own expense). In other words, they are counted ‘in addition’ to those numbers. In a sense they ‘retire’ from the active work, and in not making themselves available for stationing are not provided with a stipend or a manse (although, if certain conditions are met, they may be eligible to receive the benefits of a pension and ‘retirement’ housing).²⁶ This does not, however, mean that they ‘retire’ from being a presbyter or deacon. They continue to remain in full connexion. Although not counted in the number of those engaged in the active work, they are still accounted for by the Conference and supported as they continue to fulfil their vocation, and are still accountable to the Conference as they continue to exercise their presbyteral or diaconal ministry within the collegial work and responsibilities of all presbyters and deacons.²⁷ They are still within the covenant relationship with the Conference, and are still therefore stationed.
26. As stated above, there is a single, overarching process of stationing for all presbyters and deacons. The Conference stations each of them annually, no matter which of the various types of appointment or terms and conditions of service apply. Standing Order 785(5)(a) states that all appointments “shall take effect for one year from the first day of the month of September next following” (although clause 29 of the Deed of Union allows the President to act on behalf of the Conference and alter the stationing of a presbyter or deacon during the year if deemed necessary). Stationing is therefore annual, but Standing Orders allow for an understanding to be made that in the first

26 For a description of what it means to be ‘in the active work’ see S.O. 700(3) and (7), and S.O. 520 (1) and (2) quoted in paragraph 18 above. For ‘Supernumeraries’ see S.O. 791 (1):

791 Status and Stationing. (1) *A minister or deacon who seeks permission to become a supernumerary thereby requests an alteration in the terms and conditions of his or her service, and in particular exemption from the requirement to be available for the normal processes of stationing. He or she shall not be counted in the number of.... [the remainder of the clause is as summarised in the text above].*

27 For the continuing vocation of Supernumeraries, see S.O. 700(5) and 792(1):

700 Presbyteral Ministry. (5) *Ministers who are not in the active work, that is, supernumeraries and those without appointment, remain accountable to and accounted for by the Church, and continue to exercise their ministry as they are able according to their circumstances.*

792 Continuing Ministry. (1) (a) *Unless otherwise directed by a church court under Section 02 or 04 a supernumerary minister or deacon is expected to continue as he or she is able to exercise his or her ministry in collaboration with those in the active work in the Circuit in which he or she is stationed or elsewhere by agreement with the appropriate Superintendent or Chair.*

(b) *In the case of a supernumerary minister this shall be a continuing ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility.*

(c) *In the case of a supernumerary deacon it shall be a continuing ministry of service and witness.*

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instance a presbyter will be re-stationed in the same appointment without further process (unless the Conference itself chooses to overrule the arrangement) for a period of no longer than 5 years. Standing Order 545 then allows for a process whereby the understanding may be extended for a specified number of years, but not exceeding 5 (special processes requiring a 75% majority vote apply if there is an exceptional case for an appointment to be extended beyond 10 years). S.O. 545 primarily relates to those in circuit appointments, but the principles embedded in it apply to those in any type of appointment. S.O. 781(2)&(3) requires that in the fourth year of each period of appointment (no matter what type of appointment it is) a vocational review be undertaken of each presbyter's or deacon's experience, development and potential future deployment. The information from these reviews is then fed into the discussions of the Stationing Committee which lead to the recommendations for the stationing of each presbyter and deacon that are made to the Conference. The Conference may confirm or amend any recommendations put to it, and where it judges that a particular presbyter or deacon is needed elsewhere may override any understandings that have been reached about the length of his or her current appointment and station him or her elsewhere.

27. All presbyters and deacons are therefore stationed, and stationing is a process of deployment that is somewhat analogous to the 'posting' of people in the armed services. In the light of the model set out in paragraphs 20-23 above of all Methodist presbyters and deacons being 'extraordinary messengers', all stationing procedures should be marked by
- a common commitment to the requirements of the Kingdom;
 - a 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;
 - a transparency about motives and all material factors affecting the process.²⁸

The covenant relationship and employment status

28. In terms of Methodist tradition and theological understanding, its ministers (presbyters and deacons) are in a covenant relationship with the Conference, as described above. In terms of the law of the land, they are 'office holders' rather than 'employees'.²⁹ A covenant may involve some quasi-contractual elements, but its essence would be destroyed if it is reduced to them or they are made primary.³⁰ A covenant relationship is more broad ranging than an employment relationship, and includes those who are not provided with

28 This paragraph is based on paragraph 4.9 of *Releasing Ministers for Ministry* 2002.

29 This is the Court of Appeal judgment concerning a Methodist minister in the Parfitt case. A more recent Court of Appeal judgment concerning a minister of the New Testament Church of God which states that that minister should be treated as employed addresses different circumstances and does not of itself vary the Parfitt judgment. For the latter to happen, there may have to be a judgment in the House of Lords. A House of Lords judgment in the Percy case concerning the Church of Scotland followed by the Court of Appeal judgment about the New Testament Church of God minister may have removed any presumption that there will never be deemed to be an employer/employee relationship between a minister and a church. Each case would be judged on the facts of the case, and on the denomination's expressed understanding of the relationship – hence the importance of this statement.

30 See para. 3 above.

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remuneration or housing, those serving in appointments not within the direct control of the Methodist Church, and those who are supernumeraries or otherwise without appointment.³¹ All exercise ordained ministry in and on behalf of the Conference. To reduce consideration to those who are provided with remuneration and housing and are, for the most part, full-time, or to make them the norm from which all others are seen to deviate, would be to skew the understanding of what it is to be a Methodist presbyter or deacon and to pervert the essence of what it is to be the Methodist Church. Similarly, to concentrate only on the duty and accountability of those who are ordained and in full connexion to the Church and of the Church to them would be to dismiss the primary accountability that they and the Church have to God, not least for mediating the things of God to each other.³²

29. At the same time, the Methodist Church's traditional zeal and quest for personal and social holiness means that it expects both the Conference (as the representative body of the whole Church, and its supreme governing body under God) and those who are ordained and in full connexion with it to strive for 'best practice' in their relationships with God and their dealings with each other. Insights into what 'best practice' could be in particular instances might be prompted by reflection on the Bible and Christian tradition (and Methodist understanding in particular), or by reflection on thinking in the 'secular' world. But decisions about what should be adopted as 'best practice' should only be made when both sets of reflection have been sifted and brought against each other to test them. In other words, although the essence of the Methodist Church and its ordained ministries would be badly damaged if employment issues are treated as of primary consideration, it would also be damaged if insights from employment practice were dismissed *a priori* as of no consideration. What is required is a careful working through of how valid insights from employment practice can be incorporated into a developing understanding of the Methodist Church and its ordained ministries without damaging what is precious in that understanding.

Some consequences of the covenant relationship requiring attention in the light of the above

30. All Methodist presbyters and deacons are 'connexional people', in that they are 'in full connexion' with the Conference. This means that their 'work' or 'service' needs to be more clearly seen to relate primarily to the Church as a whole and only secondarily to the context of the particular appointment in which they are stationed. Each presbyter or deacon is the presbyter or deacon sent to a particular place rather than the presbyter or deacon who belongs to that particular situation or community: in other words she or he is the presbyter or deacon "for X" rather than "of X".
31. Since all presbyters and deacons are in full connexion with the Conference (irrespective of what type of appointment they serve in, whether it is under the control of the Church or not, whether they are supernumeraries, or under what terms and conditions they serve), the Conference needs to be equally concerned about how the vocation of each of them is nurtured and supported,

31 See paras. 19-27 above.

32 See paras. 12-13 above.

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and how each is best deployed for the sake of the Kingdom. To this end, the Stationing Committee needs to be more clearly seen to be equally responsible for all presbyters and deacons and for all types of appointment (through subsidiary bodies where necessary), and to be linked closely with those responsible for organising terms and conditions of service.

32. Similarly, because people may serve in the same type of appointment under different terms and conditions of service, a distinction needs to be more clearly made in which the terms and conditions relate to the person and the circumstances of the presbyter or deacon rather than to the profile of the particular appointment. The particular gifts of the presbyter and deacon should be matched to the pastoral, worshipping and mission needs of a particular situation. The terms and conditions under which she or might serve should be a separate process.
33. Again, to ensure that the ‘work’ or ‘service’ of each presbyter or deacon is clearly seen to be that of acting on behalf of the Conference in a succession of stations or ‘postings’ rather than of primarily being the presbyter or deacon who has occupation or tenure of a particular appointment, all responsibility for providing remuneration, housing or other benefits to presbyters and deacons should be done on behalf of the Conference. That means that, in the case of stipend, a connexional body shall pay presbyters and deacons gathering the funds from whatever sources are appropriate in order to do so (rather than, say, a Circuit being the responsible body and the connexional body acting as a channel to pay a presbyter or deacon on its behalf).
34. Clear policy needs to be set that the normal working hours for a presbyter and deacon serving in an appointment within the direct control of the Church should be no more than the European Working Hours directive (i.e. 48 hours a week including Sundays); and that part-time appointments should then be calculated pro rata.
35. Since there is now the possibility of flexible and phased retirement which might involve a presbyter or deacon receiving part stipend and part pension, the logic in paragraph 25 above needs to be more clearly carried through in practice. There needs to be a clear distinction between the conditions on which someone may qualify for pension or retirement housing, and whether she or he is in the active work or not. The two ought not to be connected.
36. Clear ways need to be developed of stating the profile of a particular appointment within the control of the Church and the particular emphases of presbyteral or diaconal ministry it might require, and of recording the terms and conditions under which a particular presbyter or deacon might serve. But they need, if possible, to be stated in such a way that the wider aspects of being in full connexion are not prejudiced or left out, and any external onlooker is not reduced to seeing the particular person in a particular appointment as the primary or only consideration.
37. Better understanding of the complex nature of accountability and better practical embodiments of it need to be developed throughout the Connexion, to enable presbyters and deacons to express their accountability to God and

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their accountability to the Church (the latter primarily to the Connexion and secondarily to the people in the local situation to which they are appointed).

*****RESOLUTION**

- 29/1.** The Conference receives the report and commends it for study and discussion throughout the Connexion.
- 29/2.** The Conference directs the Methodist Council to produce a consultation questionnaire to accompany the report, to receive any comments from Circuits, Districts and other interested parties and to report the outcomes and any resulting recommendations to the Conference in 2009.