

52. Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity

1 Terminology in contemporary society.

- 1.1 It is struggle enough for the vast majority of women and men in contemporary society to recognise an ordained person when they meet one and to address them appropriately. It is asking the impossible for ordinary people to comprehend the niceties of preferred vocabulary for ordained persons in the many Christian traditions. It is asking too much for the subtleties of Methodist order to be accessible to the generality of people going about their everyday business.
- 1.2 Methodist ordained people are therefore addressed in a variety of ways in secular settings: vicar, minister, padre, Father, parson, pastor or rector, to name a few; or something much less coherent or complimentary. Being 'Methodist' (as opposed to Anglican, Orthodox, Catholic, Baptist and the like) hardly comes into people's consciousness. Being a Methodist 'presbyter' or a Methodist 'deacon' is too arcane to be intelligible.
- 1.3 Do ordained people mind? On the whole, 'No!' It is almost always inappropriate, in making any initial conversation or contact with someone who has never had any link to a local church of any denomination, for an ordained person to bring attention to herself/himself. No ordained person should insist on being properly addressed before developing a link to people outside the Church. On the contrary, the primary ambition of any ordained person is to be of service to the person they are speaking to. So they will respond to pretty well any 'code' or 'title', however inaccurate it may be when judged against the formal vocabulary of the Church they officially represent. In ecumenical settings (e.g. an ecumenical chaplaincy team), denominational labels and formal differentiating titles used by ordained personnel are especially inappropriate. Instead, what matters when an ordained person encounters someone with no Church experience are flexibility of imagination and sensitivity to the needs of the other person, to their concerns and to their points of view. Not making an issue of ecclesiastical titles is more likely to create the environment for effective pastoral work, evangelism and engagement in mission.

2 Terminology in the Church

- 2.1 Within the Church, the situation should be different, in both informal and formal settings. The use of proper forms of address should be part of the respect that the whole Christian community gives to its office holders, lay and ordained. In particular, the whole Church should be working towards *clarity* and *consistency* in the way it speaks of and to its ordained personnel.
- 2.2 Our Methodist history leaves us now with work to do. For most of our history we have had but one order of ordained people, whom we have called 'ministers'. This in itself caused the Church some difficulty in its efforts to spell out the relationship of the ordained person ('minister') to those not ordained. The traditional lay/ordained distinction was not wholly successful: it tended to obscure fundamental theological insights – that all are baptised, all are disciples, all together form the 'whole people of God', all are called to a range of ministries in their lives, short term and long term. But however complex that discussion was in detail, everyday usage seemed

52. *Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity*

straightforward: a minister was someone ordained to the ministry of word and sacraments in the Church.

- 2.3 The decision of the Conference to recognise two orders of ordained ministry has aggravated the difficulties. Formally and informally, we talk of ministers and deacons. But, by any standard of judgment, deacons are ‘ministers’ (i.e. servants). So in various parts of the Church, especially in our formal statements, we have developed terminology which attempts to clarify the distinction between the two orders of ministry, i.e. presbyters and deacons. But this is not applied consistently in formal reports to the Conference. And informally the use of ‘presbyters’ in particular has not cut much ice. Furthermore, confusion can easily arise: ‘minister’ is sometimes used to refer only to presbyters, but sometimes to presbyters and deacons, separately and together.
- 2.4 The Conference’s recent statements to clarify the distinctiveness of each of its orders of ordained ministry are *What is a Presbyter?* and *What is a Deacon?*
- 2.5 **The proposal is that throughout the Church, informally and formally, we commit ourselves to use a clear and consistent vocabulary when speaking of those who exercise their ministry on behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain (which has traditionally been described as being “in full connexion with the Conference”):**

‘presbyter’ when we mean someone ordained into the Order of Presbyters in the Church of God, i.e. to the ministry of word, sacraments and pastoral responsibility;

‘deacon’ when we mean someone ordained into the Order of Deacons in the Church of God, i.e. to the ministry of witness through service, and who is also a member of a religious order, the Methodist Diaconal Order;

‘minister’ when we mean an ordained person, irrespective of whether they are a presbyter or a deacon.

Sometimes it may be simpler to say ‘the ordained’ or ‘ordained person(s)’, especially in contexts where there might be any suggestion, however unintended, of undermining the ministry of lay members by baldly referring to the ordained as ‘ministers’.

(Examples: we would consistently say things like: ‘The superintendent of a Circuit must be a presbyter’; and ‘All ministers are in a covenant relationship with the Conference’; and ‘Deacons, presbyters and circuit officers exercise their distinct ministries collaboratively in circuit leadership teams’.)

- 2.6 If this nomenclature is agreed by Conference, there will be a number of consequences, including:
- A revision of the Church’s foundation documents (e.g. *Constitutional Practice and Discipline*);
 - A ‘proofing’ of future Conference reports and resolutions;

52. Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity

A re-labelling of the 'Ministerial' Session of the Conference.

- 3 Language and practice: living with a measure of untidiness
- 3.1 It is crystal clear what the principal rules and intentions of the Conference are in respect of presbyters and deacons. In practice, however, things do not always work out completely in accordance with the rules, however hard people try to keep things clear and consistent.
- 3.2 For example, our rules assert that a deacon should not have pastoral charge of a local church and is not authorised to preside at holy communion. Consequently the Church in its corporate discipline does not normally look to a deacon to fulfil these particular responsibilities, precisely to honour the deacon in being authorised to exercise a complementary ministry to that of the presbyter, and also to keep clear some aspects of the distinctive ministry of the presbyter. But there are occasional exceptions – not because a deacon demands it or seeks it, but because (in all the local circumstances) something like pastoral charge or an authorisation to preside at holy communion is asked of a deacon, to deal with a pastoral emergency or an urgent mission-opportunity.
- 3.3 Eligibility for the role of Vice-President of the Conference is another such area of untidiness. Our emphasis has always been that the Vice-President is the representative lay leader of the Church. But our rules permit the office to be open to a lay person or to a deacon. So when the Vice-President is a lay person (which is the typical arrangement), there is a need for the President (always a presbyter) and the Vice-President to be sensitive to the threat that, in their connexional leadership roles, the contribution of deacons becomes invisible. On the relatively infrequent occasions when a deacon is elected to be Vice-President, the President and Vice-President will be sensitive to the threat that, in their connexional leadership roles, the contribution of lay leadership in the Church becomes invisible.
- The 2007 Conference agreed that prior to the 2009 Conference there should be a review of all aspects of the roles of President and Vice-President, within which the issues in this paragraph can be addressed.*
- 3.4 In the matter of clerical dress and clerical titles there can be further opportunities for clarity and consistency, but also for confusion. Typically a presbyter is formally addressed as 'The Revd Jane Smith' (not '[The] Revd Smith'!) and may wear a clerical collar (though there is no official dress code for presbyters). A deacon, by contrast, is formally addressed as 'Deacon Fred White' and expresses their identification with the Order by wearing the Diaconal Cross and by sharing in discussions in the Diaconal Convocation about dress codes for deacons.
- 3.5 However – returning to section 1 above – occasionally, in order to facilitate mission and pastoral opportunities with women and men who have little or no knowledge of the Church, a deacon might wear a clerical collar in certain circumstances. For example, as a chaplain; in an ecumenical context; or conducting a funeral where there has been little or no prior contact with the Church. A deacon may come to the responsible decision that a clerical collar is the most appropriate and effective way of enabling such

52. *Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity*

encounters. This is in order to help people to recognise: ‘This person has something to do with God and the Church’.

- 3.6 Within the Methodist Church context – for example Sunday worship or church meetings – where a deacon is representing and focusing a distinctive diaconal ministry which is complementary to that of a presbyter or lay person, a deacon would normally wear the Diaconal Cross and/or a symbol of it rather than a clerical collar.
- 3.7 The Diaconal Order is committed to exploring more fully, once again, a range of distinctive dress codes for deacons and bringing a proposal to Convocation in 2009.
- 4 Presbyters and deacons working together; ministers/the ordained and lay people working together
 - 4.1 Clarity and consistency in the use of language within the Church, in informal and formal settings, are not ends in themselves. But learning to speak accurately is one of the most powerful processes for changing attitudes and assumptions, and for eliminating prejudice. So using ‘minister’, ‘presbyter’ and ‘deacon’ consistently and accurately (as in 2.5 above) assists a greater goal: people affirming their identity and their distinctive vocations and thereby gaining confidence at working together collaboratively and with mutual respect to enhance the Church’s worship and mission.
 - 4.2 There is anecdotal evidence enough to suggest that more attention needs to be given to helping everyone in the Church to appreciate more profoundly the wonderful varieties of lay discipleship and lay leadership (voluntary and employed), the distinctive ministry of presbyters and the distinctive ministry of deacons. In addition, attention needs to be given to effective team working.
 - 4.3 There are some routine areas of good practice that can help distinctive ministries to flourish in and for the Church. For example:
 - (i) Leadership teams (in Local Churches, Circuits, Districts and in connexional bodies) always comprise a variety of roles. There are likely to be some or all of: lay offices filled by volunteers, lay roles filled by paid employees, presbyters and deacons. It is helpful if existing teams or groups build into their life at regular intervals opportunities for reflection on working together, to ensure that the team or group is able to hear and receive the distinctive voices of the different vocations among its membership. Allied to this is the wisdom of a team or group seeking opportunities for training in the skills of collaborative working.
 - (ii) Whenever there is a change in membership in a long-established team or group, it needs explicitly to be recognised that a ‘new’ team is coming into being. The challenge is more than the new member needing to be properly inducted into the purposes and ways of working of the earlier group. It is for the team or group, over a period, to make the space and find the time to discover how best to utilise to the full the

52. Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity

gifts, experience and expertise of all the members, and to review together, in the light of the new dynamics in the team or group, the ways of working and culture of the new team.

- (iii) There is a special need for careful education and induction for all concerned, when a deacon is stationed for the first time to a Circuit; and when, for the first time, a Circuit employs a lay person as part of the staff team. This provides a context to explore in some depth the distinctive roles and contributions of people with particular vocations whom God has provided to a Circuit (or a Local Church or a District or a connexional body) to enrich its life and the ways in which they may complement one another.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 52/1.** The Conference receives the Report.
- 52/2.** The Conference adopts the proposal in paragraph 2.5 of the Report.
- 52/3.** The Conference directs the Law and Polity Committee to report to the Conference of 2009 on the items in paragraph 2.6 of the Report.