

# Diaconal Consultation – 21-23 April, 2010

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## Introduction

The consultation was held at the Methodist Diaconal Centre in Birmingham. It was held in the context of shared worship and shared stories with the hope that the embedded theology within the narratives might further the understanding that needs to exist as our two Churches work towards ‘full, visible communion’. The harmony experienced by the group during its time together greatly facilitated a sense of willingness to be open and honest to one another. In an endeavour to enrich the diaconal ministry of our two traditions, as modelled by deacons specifically, this report has included some of the testimonies and experiences of those involved in the consultation. These stories are interspersed amongst the particular questions that needed addressing, adding practical engagement to theological reflection. Although there is not always a direct correlation between story and section, they are paraphrases, illustrations, windows into diaconal experiences which inform the theological discussion throughout. Though some of the conclusions may be difficult for the churches, those present parted as friends and all felt that they had benefited and gained some learning about the way in which our traditions, and the nature of each call, had shaped and changed those attending.

The aim of the discussion was to answer the twelve questions in *Embracing the Covenant*. Within this single task, it was hoped to discern answers to the questions:

- What do we have in common?
- What do have that is peculiar/different?
- Where is there potential to converge?

The questions from *Embracing the Covenant* are answered sequentially, giving evidence that each could be considered separately. In reality, many of the issues overlap so, for example, the outward-looking nature of the ministry of a deacon can be expressed as both service and mission and there are many examples when it is impossible to separate these duties.

# **1. How does the diaconate relate to the Church's ministry of the word and of the sacraments?**

Within our two traditions our distinct and different understanding of certain words needs great care – one word can have two meanings; one phrase can have two contexts. Such a phrase is ‘word and sacrament’. Another phrase is ‘diaconal ministry’ which is rightly the work of all Christian people and is different from ‘the ministry of deacons’.

In Methodism, a ministry of ‘word and sacrament’ has a particular focus for presbyteral ministry and is accompanied by a leading and directing role. The ministry of deacons in the Methodist Church is distinct from that of presbyters, and the Diaconal Order is a separate Order of Ministry and a Religious Order. This said, it was recognised that very many forms of ministry for both Churches, and all Christians within them, could be described as foretelling, forth-telling, sacramental, incarnational and pastoral – ministry which reflects the symbolic world of Christ's sacrifice, of being Christ in that place; as representing the Church of God in that place. So defined, ‘sacramental’ ministry could apply to lay ministries as much as ordained ministries.

Some would therefore not wish to define ‘word and sacrament’ as narrowly as the Methodist Church has in the past. For the Church of England, where diaconal ordination is usually transitional on the way to priestly ordination, the ministry of word and sacrament is foundational for the deacon (in assisting the priest) and normal throughout the threefold ministry into priesthood and episcopacy. In the Methodist Church, where diaconal ordination is not transitional, deacons work collaboratively with all forms of ministry, lay and ordained, with complementary and differently-focussed ministries both in circuit ministry teams, for example, and outside of circuit structures. Despite the potential for ‘sacramental’ to mean so much more, the traditional understanding of the phrase ‘word and sacrament’ (with its distinctively Methodist reference to preaching and presiding at Holy Communion) does not easily fit with Methodist understanding of diaconal ministry, since when Methodist deacons preach, they do so as Local Preachers and do not normally preside at Holy Communion.

For both Methodist and Anglican deacons, there was an underlying Christological theme as ministry was described. It suggested a diaconal emphasis upon mirroring Christ in the Gospel stories and a presbyteral focus on mirroring Christ as portrayed within the epistles. Thus deacons related to embodying the Gospel in their vocation; a restlessness to proclaim the ‘foolishness’ of the Gospel in their work and relationships; to be like ‘oil flowing into the space and taking shape there’; moving beyond the ministry of the church; challenging the church. Deacons were called to unsettle and challenge the church and to challenge injustice; to travel along with people... for a time, breaking open the word, sowing the seed without necessarily seeing the fruit. Work was relational, teaching, forming, being invisible but abundantly present, offering prophetic leadership; being a mischievous messenger to all. The stories related, from both Methodist and Anglican deacons, had a common thread of alteriority – radically reinterpreting the location of power, focussing upon another and working as a go-between.

In both traditions, a diaconal role in the liturgical life of the Church was important but divergent. In both traditions, the idea of the deacon assisting in the Eucharist was felt to express the nature of diaconal ministry and reflect the Methodist Church's insistence that although deacons need not be preachers, all must be trained worship leaders. Moreover, the outward focussed nature of the diaconal ministry, to the world outside of the church, was felt to be powerfully expressed in the deacon ‘sending out’ the people at the end of the Eucharist or offering the final statements at a funeral, or embedded within hospice chaplaincy, for example. The traditions differ over the specific ways in which to share in the Ministry of the Word, since Methodist deacons do not have to be qualified as preachers so that when deacons preach they do so as Local Preachers.

*The liturgical role of a deacon has always been particularly important to me... I used to take communion to an elderly lady in hospital. When she died, I went with the rector to the crematorium, as the family had left her to go unaccompanied. This was 'so powerful', part of my role in 'sending people out – 'Go forth from this world' '; it's rooted and related to the Eucharist.*

*The best examples of diaconal work always have Biblical foundations. I was a community development worker in Bradford for 5 years working out of a Portakabin on a highly deprived estate. One day, a woman came in complaining about all the bad press the estate received in the local media. The people in the area had got used to me saying 'I know a Bible story about that'... I recounted the story where it was asked about Jesus 'can anything good come from Nazareth?' and I was able to share 'good news'. Over time I built links between local women and a specific reporter on the local paper who sought out good stories each month about the estate.*

## **2. What sort of leadership role is appropriate to deacons?**

Throughout the consultation, and especially in conversations about leadership, there was a distinction drawn between understandings of 'service' and 'servant'. The deacons strongly resisted images of Jesus (and through this their own self-identity and vocation) as 'meek and mild'. Jesus came to serve and radically inverted power relationships by choosing to serve. That choice did not make him a slave to what everyone around him told him to do, or a servant of their every whim. There is a distinction between such servility and freely given service as a measure of love for others and God's love for us. Service that is chosen is very different from the concept of bound service inherent within being unable to get out of the powerless role of being a servant. The Gospel may be incarnationally embodied in the choice to give service, not out of compulsion or servility, but born of free will – and not in a philanthropic sense of doing good to others, but out of identifying with them. Although clearly the role of Christian obligation and Paul's insistence in using the vocabulary of slavery as the background for all roles within the Christian Church needs to be kept in mind.

In discussions about leadership, there was broad agreement and consensus. Leadership for deacons is prophetic, servant leadership, modelling Christ and exemplified by taking initiative to work at the edges, on the fringe of traditional styles of 'church work'. Leadership within the diaconate is shown in service which points to God and heralds good news. It is task-orientated but not so focused on the future goal that you miss what is happening in the here and now.

Because diaconal work is fundamentally relational, there is always space for adaptation and adjustment. This is because of the place for listening, for reciprocal learning, each energising the other. There is flexibility and fluidity in the diaconal role, including going into each situation and asking 'what does it mean to be a deacon in this place?'. Activities may seem 'chaotic' and 'mischievous' and this is about being radical whilst also being intentional and purposeful. The work may involve teaching or facilitating, making things happen, solutions focussed, involving passion and enthusiasm that allows other people to buy into something.

This work can exist within the institution working 'middle-in' rather than 'top-down' or 'bottom-up', for example, as an aide to a Bishop working with curates across a wide theological spectrum, acting as a go-between, nurturing, teaching, offering pastoral care, being alongside people, and connecting people

at different levels of authority. This work can also exist outside the institution, reaching out beyond traditional boundaries in shared concern with others: helping those at the margins of society, challenging injustice, enabling others to participate in something they otherwise might not get the chance to do, and then continuing to interpret the project back to the churches through preaching and teaching. Thus deacons act as a bridge-builders and interpreters, helping people to work together, based on a multiplicity of networking roles. This is modelling and enabling aspects of leadership that is also about activity and stepping forward in faith. Of course, this role can be at times isolating for individual deacons, especially when it brings them into conflict with both those within the church and those outside it.

Methodist deacons talked more about their role in the wider community. Anglican deacons talked more about roles within the church. It was agreed that there were positive challenges to learn from different emphases and that both aspects were real places for diaconal ministry.

*I have a role with newly ordained clergy. There are a multiplicity of roles concerning academic, ministerial, liaison between the bishop and curates – flicking between roles and perceptions. There is a need for effective administration, to advocate collaboration between clergy, to build bridges between different theological traditions, to offer pastoral support and be able to reflect, speak and write into the different arenas.*

*This can be prophetic leadership – there is gentleness and also authority. It is a ministry which stirs and it is also unsettling; a sense of never fitting in anywhere. It points to God. It is about being a herald of good tidings.*

*I work with community groups who are all involved in the issue of human trafficking. It began out of an awareness that people didn't meet together and share common concerns: the police, UK Border Agency, Crown Prosecution Service, the Refugee Council, locally based organizations. Previously there was no space for discussing problems, queries and so on. I was able to draw more people in, build bridges and hear stories e.g. men being trafficked have little support, women are being trafficked for domestic servitude. I could incorporate theological reflection to question our tendency to go in and try to fix issues, rather than also acknowledging our own culpability and vulnerability by acknowledging the common desire of all people for cheap goods, etc. which leads to people being treated as commodities. Sin flourishes where there is chaos and a lack of communication, so by bringing people together, I can challenge this. The level of trust established means that very different people with very different views and motives can listen to each other because of their shared interest in the issues. It's messy! How do I resist being a glorified social worker? I am a member of religious order. My authority comes from elsewhere – its part of my vocation.*

### **3. How are the languages of service and of proclamation, found in the ordination liturgies of both churches, related and integrated?**

There is a potential and actual lack of understanding of the way in which deacons use words related to ‘service’ (see opening explanations to question 2 above). Deacons demonstrate servant leadership and share good news. The language of being a ‘herald’ was especially evident in the Anglican ordinal, drawing especially on the work of John Collins and his interpretation of the deacon as ‘kerux’; the Methodist ordinal reflected a different heritage and legacy from the days of Wesley Deaconesses to the present form. The representatives from both traditions had some reservations about their own existing ordinals, including querying the references to foot washing, as being particularly associated with the role of a deacon, when the Biblical references do not limit it in this way.

Where the language of being a servant is used, then the context of such statements matter e.g. when the Bishop says ‘remember you are servants’. According to deacons within the Church of England, this has the potential to be unhelpful if it is interpreted as ‘pulling rank’ and reminding people ‘he is powerful’, rather than endorsing a model of leadership which should be embraced by all clergy across the threefold order.

Critically, there is a close relationship between the words ‘deacon’, ‘minister’, and ‘servant’. They are all variously used to translate a small selection of Greek words. Too much subtlety in distinguishing between these words is meaningless. The context of service, serving and being a servant provides the deeper level of meaning. Within the Methodist Diaconal Order this is done by specific references to the nature of the calling in their recent publicity and information: ‘[deacons are part of a] mission-focused, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God’s world.’ In the ordinal, ideas of ‘service’ are developed by words such as visiting, supporting, seeking, helping and ideas of ‘proclamation’ are developed by promoting work of worship, prayer and the holding before God’s people of the needs and concerns of the world. It was acknowledged that there was a distance between the current practice of Methodist deacons and the implications of the ordinal, indicating that a revision of the ordinal would be worth considering.

Overall there was considerable resonance and overlap between the two ordinals. It was felt that the words used to describe the purpose of deacons’ ministry in the ordinals were somewhat different from those that deacons from both Churches used to describe their own ministry. This is evident within the stories and testimonies included within this report.

*I am a non-preaching deacon. [My message] is about social justice – in God’s economy, where Jesus notices something quite different about what is important. I am a messenger to the gathered community: challenging injustice – not just leaving it as a story but making the Church restless.*

*I connect with the story about Jairus’ daughter... Diaconal ministry is about doing something along the way – not so focussed upon the goal that you miss what is happening in the present. Jesus doesn’t lose his focus even when he is told he is too late. It’s all about God’s timing and responding to the need.*

#### **4. What is the significance of the fact that, in both our Churches, deacons are ordained – i.e. the diaconate is an order of ministry?**

That deacons have an ordained ministry is significant to both the Church of England and the Methodist Church. The significance has distinctive reference points in the histories and traditions of both Churches. The history has the potential to create divergence rather than convergence within discussions.

Both traditions recognise the importance of the ministry of the whole people of God. As such, not all ministry is carried out by deacons, presbyters or bishops. The whole church, both laity and ordained, participate in the mission of God. This said, there are distinctive identity markers for the diaconate as exemplars of the ministry of Christ. The ministry of deacons offers recognised signs and examples of what the whole church is called to be and deacons have a public, representative ministry within the Church.

The Anglican Church practices sequential ordination so that normally all bishops and priests have previously been ordained deacons and remain deacons. As such sequential ordination could be seen as cumulative ordination. For some, however, the calling to the diaconate is primary and the vital essence of their calling – they are ‘distinctive deacons’ rather than ‘transitional deacons’ called to other ministries within the threefold order. There is a thought, especially expressed by those within the Church of England, that ‘the hidden deacon’ needs to be recovered and celebrated within the other orders of ministry. Other distinct groups within the Church of England offer ministry that is analogous to diaconal ministry: Church Army, readers and so on. Indeed, some lay people can undertake the deacon’s role within the liturgy of the Church of England. There is a discussion whether, if such people have a lifelong call to this work, they should consider whether they should become deacons. In order for a permanent Anglican diaconate to have a distinctive identity then there is a need for the Church of England to develop discussion and training of this order of ministry, and time needs to be allowed for deacons to inhabit this ministry. This may lead to a reflection that the conventional period of a year between being ‘deaconed’ and being ‘priested’ is too short. This idea would be resisted by some for whom non-diaconal ministries are the focus of their calling.

For the Methodist Church, up until 1936 the Wesley Deaconesses made a lifelong commitment, that was affirmed by the church through a service of ‘consecration’. After this date, deacons were ordained. In 1998, the church gave further symbolic affirmation by receiving deacons into full Connexion so that membership of the church was held centrally rather than within a local Circuit. This made the formal recognition of the representational role of deacons identical to that received by presbyters. In the Methodist Church, there has never been the possibility of easy transition between Diaconal and Presbyteral orders of ministry. A minister who wishes to move from one order of ministry to the other must officially resign from their former order. So, leaving the Methodist Diaconal Order (that is, the religious community) was symbolised historically by returning the badge given at Ordination. A significant number of women ceased to be deaconesses when the presbyterate was first opened to women and some of these retained ‘associate membership’ of the Order because they could not bear to leave the diaconate behind. Not many people leave the Order nowadays. The concept of ‘resigning’ from one form of ordination to enter another was strongly resisted by the Church of England members taking part in the Diaconal Consultations.

Discussions about whether Methodist deacons could embrace a transitional model i.e. the possibility of moving to the presbyterate without ‘returning the badge’ generated negative responses, as did a challenge to Methodist presbyters to consider ordination to the diaconate prior to becoming a presbyter. These reactions represented deep seated perceptions of the ontology of ordination for the Methodists, highlighting different views of what is going on ontologically at ordination and how people are called to the respective orders within their tradition. It is a challenge posed by Church of England

colleagues that Methodists come to understand the diaconal order as part of one ministry of Christ energised by one Spirit. This too is recognised as a statement arising from a specific encounter with vocation and familiarity with transitional models of ordination. Reflections on question 5 continue this line of thinking.

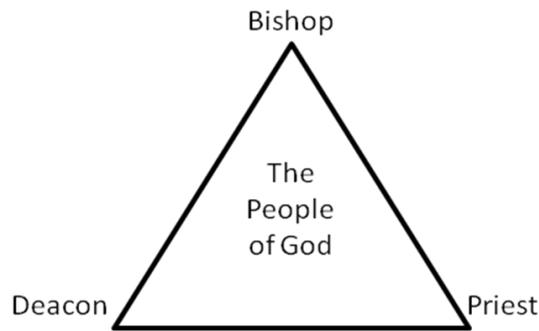
*My calling to diaconal work is illustrated in the story about the woman who anointed Jesus. Her vulnerability made his significance known. There is an extravagant abundance – the oil takes the shape of the space: fluid, invisible, morphing. I am called to be a deacon – it's in my bones. I want to ask 'what does it mean to be a deacon in this place?' I have a call to respond in a specific way and that call is made known in the MDO.*

## **5. What issues are raised by the difference of custom in our Churches regarding direct or sequential ordination to the presbyterate?**

The relationship between different orders of ministry within any tradition of the Church needs to be handled carefully - with concepts of service and servanthood being filled with meaning and shared understanding in order to avoid the development of inappropriate or abusive power struggles between the various orders of ministry.

There is a desire to ensure that diaconal and presbyteral roles are not carved apart in terms of how they relate to each other. Across the two traditions, the number of Methodist deacons is proportionally much larger and growing. Here there is an understood difference between presbyteral work and diaconal work: 'if a deacon isn't there, this specific work won't be done'. Presbyters have a much more institutionalised role (or institutionally focussed role) and tend to be tied to duties that may well lead them to be jealous about the freedom that deacons have to 'serve' at 'the coal face': the choices involved in presbyteral ministry compel you to do less of the diaconal to fulfil the presbyteral, such as the need to constantly deliver church services, service structures of oversight and accountability, etc. In the Methodist Church, the ministry of presbyters and deacons are complementary and distinctive. The picture discussed was three-dimensional: a coin – where deacons (one side) and presbyters (the other side) served God's people to bound and integrate the whole; meeting all needs.

In the Church of England the diaconate is frequently seen as a probationary year; an experience of transition before becoming a priest. For some this is perceived as 'an additional burden' whereas others would wish to strongly assert the diaconate as an equal order. Sequential ordination can create a hierarchy of authority and power e.g. 'There are still priests around who assume that they have authority over her because she is a deacon.' This statement was more prevalent before women could be ordained priest so that female deacons who wanted to be priests have now become priests. Now Diocesan Directors of Ordinands are aware of the permanent diaconate as a potential calling for both men and women and the recent report on *Mission and Ministry in the Church* has actively encouraged the further development of the distinctive diaconate. In the Church of England, the picture of ministry is that of a triangle with 3 corrective foci at different points of a triangle – bishop, priest and deacon – with the diaconal ministry of the whole church, including laity, operating in the space between these. The deacon's role should speak into, and challenge, the power, authority and hierarchy implied by a sequential set of orders. This role could affirm the worth of distinctive, permanent Anglican deacons.



The two pictures of a ‘two-sided coin’ (within Methodism) and ‘triangle’ (within the Church of England) emerge as a way of illustrating a common approach to Christian ministries within two different systems of polity. There are deep seated differences here, partly as a result of the distinctive vocational discernment processes, especially within the Methodist Church and a calling to a separate vocation and route to ordination. If a distinctive diaconate is to exist within the Churches, renewed and reclaimed in the Church of England especially, then Anglicans may wish to ask what guidance and understanding of diaconal ministry will exist to help those who embody the sequential diaconate?

This said, what may be perceived as a barrier to ‘full visible communion between our two Churches’, i.e. the differences between direct and sequential ordination to presbyteral ministry, may not be so because the Lutheran Churches of the Porvoo Agreement also practice direct ordination to the priesthood and are in communion with the British and Irish Anglican Churches.

*I am a deacon. I am part of the Bishop's household...*

*Diaconal ministry is paradoxical – provoking change but also grounded and with others. The diaconate accepts oversight and is completely related to the church's ministry.*

*I am not called to be a deacon... (Methodist presbyter)*

## **6. What is the significance of the fact that in the Methodist Church the diaconate is a religious order as well as an order of ministry?**

Within the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO), some deacons feel their primary calling is to be a member of a religious order and for them the practice of diaconal ministry is secondary, while others feel a call to a life long commitment to the practice of diaconal ministry as an ordained person, as their primary focus, and membership of a religious order is therefore secondary. As these different deacons work together, both streams have come closer together. Now there is a complex and subtle spiritual mix which combines self-identity, physical resources, and a mechanism for support through daily prayer, area meetings and convocation. Deacons are a community of practice, with the Order providing a strong sense of mutual responsibility and accountability. This is a very distinctive symbiosis of work and spiritual structuring, not generally experienced by Methodist presbyters who can be individuals who need strong encouragement to create supportive relationships.

There is a positive, wistful admiration for the sense of spiritual connection and collegiality experienced by Methodist deacons from Church of England deacons, within the threefold ministry. Collegiality within the Church of England varies widely from place to place and can be found within the college of bishops, priests in a diocese, in the Maundy Thursday Eucharist, in the distinctive diaconate and sometimes in theological colleges. Anglicans would emphasise collegiality, including a particularly strong relationship needed between the deacons and the bishop. Some dioceses recognise a college of deacons. In practice, however, many distinctive deacons are on the margins and need more of a collective voice. There is a particular issue around how deacons integrate with presbyters locally and the nature of support offered by the Deanery Chapter. This can provide some support but there is no understanding of this as a religious order.

*The image of Christ that appeals to me today is... the laughing Christ. There are lots of diaconal ministries that are about pain and suffering but today I want to focus upon the joy of this ministry. It's a party!*

*It's messy! How do I resist being a glorified social worker? I am a member of religious order. My authority comes from elsewhere – its part of my vocation.*

## **7. What can we learn from each other's ordination services for the diaconate and what questions would we wish to put to each other about these liturgies?**

There were many areas of shared resonance and overlap between the two ordinals. Both provided ordination to the universal church. There were similarities in liturgies of examination and declaration. Nothing in the other tradition's ordinal was considered 'deeply offensive'.

An Anglican deacon's identity was located in the symbolic giving of a stole to be worn when assisting at the Eucharist. In this ordinal, the role of 'herald' is clearly stated. Allegiance is given to both Sovereign and Bishop. The Bishop is the ordaining authority, through the laying on of hands, and enables a deacon to hold a position located within the diocese and in relationship with him. Deacons are given specific licences that help to define and authorise their work within a place.

A Methodist deacon's identity is located in the giving of a badge, locating that person as a member of the Order. In parallel with the pattern of ordination for Methodist presbyters, deacons are received into Full Connexion by a standing vote of the Conference. Methodist ordination services include the laying on of hands by the President (or a former President) of the Conference, the Warden of the Diaconal Order and also a World Church Representative. The Warden has separately, and previously, stationed the deacon to a specific work, somewhere across the Connexion.

As noted above, the representatives from both Churches had some reservations about their own existing ordinals, including querying the references to foot washing. On the other hand, words used within the two-day conference to discuss the essence of contemporary diaconal ministry, were missing from the ordinals, indicating a possible need to update both ordination services. Of particular note was the neglect of references to the religious order aspect of being a Methodist deacon.

*In Leeds... I work with asylum seekers, where the churches had become engaged in befriending and making vague prayers about the issue. When a local man and his son were taken to a detention centre, the man committed suicide, apparently so that his son could stay in the country. He had received no legal representation at his appeal. This led the churches to explore how they could help with the legal needs of asylum seekers at appeal, with a steering group of Christians forming to support this. The resulting group has raised funds and engaged three part time workers and pro-bono lawyers plus volunteers, with volunteers and clients not necessarily Christian. This is a diaconal project because it is working with those on the margins of society (not just those within 'the church') and challenging injustice by doing something. I provide line management for the staff and interpret the project to the church, as part of its own diaconal ministry, through sermons, talks, etc., as well as interpreting the church's role to the city as part of the church's voice in wider society.*

*Good work is often the work in small things: working with churches day to day, and liaising with London [Council] boroughs. For me, being a deacon is grounded in the worshipping community, and going from the outside-in and inside-out – not just setting up lots of projects. Central to this is building community, both in the church and with the wider world. One church had renovated a building, but was asking 'what next?' They recognised older people were excluded, so I suggested developing a 'holiday at home' scheme. This set the church alive in its worship, and led to them raising funds for a lay worker to support further development. It was important that the work involved being there for the long haul.*

## **8. What resources and insights can 'What is a deacon?' and 'The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church' contribute to our joint reflections on the diaconate?**

As a matter of clarification the Church of England document has not been formally approved by General Synod, but as an official report of a related body, nevertheless has some official recognition and status. This was different to the Methodist 'What is a Deacon?' report, which was adopted as a Statement of the Conference, the highest level of ownership possible within the Methodist Church. The comments below summarise contributions made by separate Methodist and Church of England groups reflecting upon the documents of the other Church.

The Church of England 'Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church' has the undoubted strength of talking about different forms of lay ministry alongside other ordained ministries. The paper understands that deacons have an assisting role, rather than presiding, and reports direct to the Bishop. There was an acknowledged and ongoing discussion within the Church of England between some of the lay ministries and the work of ordained deacons. The diaconate is clearly part of sequential ordination. There is an acknowledged trajectory, from lay to threefold, ordained ministries. Remaining a distinctive deacon can be difficult and these deacons had stories about being asked about when they were going to be priested. From the Methodist point of view, the document was perceived as being aspirational and without strong evidence to support it within dioceses.

The Methodist 'What is a Deacon?' has value in the fact that Conference promises to support deacons'

ministry. From the perspective of Church of England contributors, the document acknowledged the sacramental nature of diaconal work, but did not emphasise it sufficiently strongly. The phrase ‘witness through service’ could be weak if it was not filled with meaning. Positively, there was a balance between servant ministry and ambassadorial roles, within diaconal work. Much more could be said within this document about the diaconate in the world church context (both historical and contemporary), and in light of other traditions of ordained ministry. The diaconate is positively portrayed as a representative people, as hermeneuts, as having strong collegiality and able to demonstrate diaconal leadership. Critically, it was felt that, without some sense of priority within the Church, a potential for divergence between presbyteral and diaconal orders of ministry must remain a possibility.

*Vocation needs continually working out, testing and shaping in each appointment and position...*

*I have difficulty with ‘witness through service’ and could make better sense of ‘service through witness’...*

## **9. How do deacons equip and enable Christians for mission and ministry?**

One of the many strengths of the ministry of deacons is to unsettle the church and ‘stir up’ action. This is frequently done through a relational ministry, acting as a challenge or advocate of individuals in whom time is invested. There is a sense of working towards social justice; activity that is merited within church structures *and* on the edges of church life, but always firmly embedded within the fabric of society. Christ is at work through the deacon and in the life of ‘the other’.

Mission can be a primary task, attributed as a distinct descriptor of an activity, or found in indirect forms through enabling outreach and facilitating action. There was a sense that God’s mission was being carried out wherever deacons found themselves working in situations where others did not want to work. Being in collaboration with others was a key theme in shared stories about projects and achievements as told by contemporary deacons. Examples of mission would thus include working as a Diocesan Director of Ordinands, being a chaplain in a retail outlet, sharing time with prostitutes, working with asylum seekers or taking a stance against human trafficking. Part of the problem and confusion of the diaconate is that diaconal ministry is grounded in the call of all believers, but that deacons act as a ‘magnifying glass’ for this ministry.

Of note is the statement on all material connected to the MDO which declares that the Methodist Diaconal Order is ‘a mission-focused, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God’s world.’

*I connect with the scripture passage... which is about Mary visiting Elizabeth. It captures the reciprocal nature of listening to each other and ministering to each other. I can relate this to my role in training, in spiritual direction and in chaplaincy. Ministry happens both ways. It’s about support and, when invited, about sharing faith.*

## 10. What authority is given to deacons, by whom and for what tasks?

For both Churches, the response to this question arises from a common understanding that the calling is God's work in the lives of the individuals and He bestows authority to others. The ministry of those ordained deacon is owned by the church, who then releases deacons into a representative work for the Kingdom, on behalf of others, and in accord with individual gifts and graces. There is a sense of the church giving, empowering and releasing: the picture is of a strong elastic tether that enables people to be sent out, let out yet with a connection that can support and pull back. Deacons work with a sense of personal autonomy and under the oversight of others, both in response to a calling from God within the context of a known tradition and structure.

Within the Church of England, one way of understanding the distinctive nature of deacons is that deacons are seen as being part of the bishop's household. Whereas, in some understandings, the presbyterate is a representative of the bishop, the deacon is in his household. Deacons all hold bishop's licences that connect them to a particular role and location for ministry. Ordination as a deacon is life long and the licence is time limited. For some the work will be directly for the bishop, for most others the work will be connection with others across the diocese.

Within the Methodist Church, one of the expressions of authority takes the form of direct stationing by the Warden. The Warden is appointed by Conference. Deacons work to a circuit profile and under a system of mutual accountability to both local colleagues in the circuit and to the Warden of the MDO. This creates a multiple focus of responsibility – the Order, the role, circuit, location.

Within both Churches, it was acknowledged that diaconal ministry can be disabled by presbyteral colleagues, whereas it is doubtful that diaconal ministry would disable presbyteral ministry. This is especially true when the full breadth and potential of diaconal ministry is misunderstood or seen to be subordinate within a group of ministers. Diaconal work is most effective when deacons are trusted, released and given permission to take risks.

*I connect with the scripture passage... which is about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. He asked the woman to give him a drink – allowing the Christ in me to minister to the Christ in the other, and inviting others to join in with this process. He didn't respond to the woman as someone who was immoral, but as someone who was a victim of her circumstances. The story raises the ambiguity and chaos in diaconal ministry...*

*I can relate to this image... which reminds me of standing alongside clergy in their ministry, of travelling with other people: teaching, breaking open the word, sacrament. It's for a short period of time: sowing the seed without necessarily seeing the fruit.*

## 11. How can our Churches' current priority of mission, including evangelism, find expression and embodiment in the ministry of deacons?

In as much as deacons strongly identify with embodying Christ and working in ways and with people as exemplified in the Gospels, all diaconal ministry is missional ministry.

There is a sense of deacons going where the church does not go in the scope of its' traditional responsibilities. Deacons 'go' as trained, ordained, representative members of the church. In the Methodist Church, deacons are usually in stipendiary ministry, while in the Anglican Church distinctive deacons are often non-stipendiary. Whilst diaconal ministry is frequently linked with the concept of 'service' it was not witnessing through concepts connected to 'servility' but rather through building community, networking between churches and community groups, engaging with issues of social justice, acting as mediator and advocate, bridge-building, teaching and negotiating, clarifying language and exploring new frameworks for action. A picture which expresses something of the 'now but not yet' is discerned within thoughts about the significance of Easter Saturday: waiting for the hope, holding out for hope when it seems it is not coming, holding hope in the midst of darkness.

For the Methodist Church there is an explicit stress upon working as a 'mission-focused' Order. Whilst it is true that all Christian people are called to service, the MDO fills the word 'service' with meaning through a focus on mission. For one deacon this meant embracing an understanding of diaconal work and thus draw attention to visible signs of invisible grace in her work with others on the margins, to access groups outside the church and develop their understanding, 'I find God where I go.' At least one deacon in the Church of England is part of a 'Mission Resourcing Team' and involved in more overt and declaratory forms of evangelism and outreach, although this is not the norm.

The phraseology 'mission-focused' could be problematic because of the connotations and expectations of what 'mission' meant in some contexts, yet the confusion and ambiguity of the word 'mission' also meant that it was used to denote enabling, outreach, service, and so on. Deacons involved in chaplaincy might find themselves supporting people and not sharing faith unless invited; just being there as a form of ministry.

*I like the image of the cross from El Salvador because it is representative of the people that deacons are sent to. It's possibly drawn by someone within that community and they own the cross for themselves – skills, abundance, baby and mother, woman – a Christ figure? The cross offers all of this for us.*

*The ecumenical journey towards Street Pastors began four years before it started. The local Methodist churches requested that I attend discussions to develop this project on behalf of the church. I quickly realised that I was the only one in the room who already knew everyone else, including people at opposite ends of the theological spectrum. So, I acted as a bridge-builder and interpreter, helping people to work together, based on a multiplicity of network roles, and modelling and enabling leadership that also acts and does. As the group developed, they decided who in the steering group was best to do each task. My role included speaking to the media because of my existing links with them, my ability to get this to happen, and my passion and enthusiasm to encourage others to be involved. I continue to be the only street pastor who is both actively out on the streets and on the management committee as well.*

## 12. What issues concerning the interchangeability of ordained ministries are raised by the current theology and practice of our Churches with regard to the diaconate?

Fundamentally, deacons from the churches have a shared understanding of diaconal ministry and how it operates within their Church. The permanent Church of England deacons, those who are not called to the priesthood, entirely relate to the Methodist deacons and their ministry. This is evident in discussions attempting to find the essence of ‘what is diaconal ministry?’ within three words. The two Churches had three separate words that were also similar in meaning and representative of their history and influence:

Anglican	Methodist
Relational	Rooted
Herald	Public, representative ministry
Boundary-crossing	Radical

Whilst the emergence of this shared understanding was encouraging, suggesting convergence, subsequent discussions were able to tease out diverging understandings of theology and practice with regard to the diaconate. To some extent the conversation about interchangeability cannot focus upon the diaconate alone and must include an understanding of presbyteral ministry. Anglican priests are deacons. Methodist presbyters are not deacons – in other words, all deacons are Methodist ministers but not all Methodist ministers are deacons. The Church of England practises sequential ordination and the Methodist Church practises direct ordination.

The response to question 5 introduced pictures of Methodist ministry functioning as two sides of one coin, presbyter and deacon, and Anglican ministry functioning as a triangle, a threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon. The specific tradition sets the particular structures, options and conditions available to people who offer ministry within that particular organisation. Thus, many Anglican priests are called to priesthood but enter this calling via the diaconate because of their own church’s structure and process. Methodist presbyters are called upon to specifically discern a calling to a distinctive responsibility that includes aspects of diaconal ministry but is not a call to the diaconate.

There can be said to be a functional symmetry between Anglican priests and Methodist presbyters but not the same ministry because of distinctly different components to their identity. Previous conversations about the interchangeability of the ministries of priests and presbyter conversation have left the role and influence of the diaconate aside and invisible. Current conversations with deacons from the two Churches raise important ontological distinctions.

## Concluding Comments

The diaconal consultation held on 21-23 April, 2010 produced some challenging findings with which our traditions will continue to wrestle. Some descriptive and helpful pictures emerged, enabling improved understanding.

The consultation was felt to have been a harmonious and collaborative exchange of ideas and perceptions. This was likened to hearing ‘different notes but the same melody’. Within the whole, different components were introduced, played in major and minor keys, and there was a common knowledge that the people outside needed to hear the resurrection song.

The question was asked: What does ‘full, visible unity’ mean?

- It was felt important to welcome in deacons from another Church with openness and a willingness to learn and grow together, each retaining distinctiveness and holding on to that which is precious and life-giving within their vocation and calling.
- There is a need for an ongoing and developing understanding of diaconal theology rooted in contemporary praxis and practise.
- There is a need for both traditions to own this ministry and explore ‘how the church is changed by this ministry.’
- There is an ecumenical ferment about the nature of the diaconate, which is an encouraging sign, and is good for the development of the diaconate in all churches.
- Both Anglican and Methodist understandings have moved in the recent past and this should continue.
- From the Church of England point of view, the difference in practice between direct and sequential ordination is not in itself a barrier to full visible communion between the Methodist and Church of England Churches, because the Lutheran Churches of the Porvoo Agreement also practice direct ordination to the priesthood and are in communion with the British and Irish Anglican Churches.

For the Church of England:

- There is a need to allow the permanent diaconate ‘to be a bit more bold’ and enable all parts of the church to make more of the diaconal ministry whether embodied in deacons, priests or bishops.
- There is a need to strengthen collegiality and build upon the solid base for the diaconate that already exists within the Church of England.

For the Methodist Church:

- There are hopes for further convergence in theology and practice, and towards living out the mission of God.
- There is a hope that when the Methodist Church further articulates its understanding of the diaconate, there is an explicit (rather than implicit) relationship of diaconal ministry to the ministry of the Word and to worship.
- The Methodist Church is encouraged to continue wrestling with the relationship between the orders of ministry as understood within the Methodist Church and the three-fold order exemplified in the Church of England and which prevails so widely in the universal Church.

In conclusion, the diverse understandings of our callings are rooted in the rich histories and traditions of our Churches. Understanding the differences is a treasure to the dialogue between the Church of England and the Methodist Church and it can only ever help deepen the melody that is composed, as we all offer our ministries in God’s world.