

Probationer presbyters in local ecumenical partnerships – guidance note

Approved by the meeting of the Stationing Committee in March 2016

One of the joys and challenges of working ecumenically is that of sharing in ministry with those whose understanding of ordination and leadership differs from ours. In the context of a local ecumenical partnership both joy and challenge are magnified: the former because of the confidence that we minister in a situation where there has been consideration of the issues and a decision to welcome and to celebrate difference and the latter because differences can appear more significant when members of another denomination offer and receive ministry on a regular and committed basis.

One of the distinctive features of the Methodist Church is the practice of asking accepted candidates for ordination to serve their first two years in active ministry on probation. These years are part of their training and testing. Although in many ways they will appear to be ‘doing the job’ of an ordained minister, they will be working under close supervision and with a number of restrictions. Most significant amongst these (for probationer presbyters) is that they do not hold pastoral charge of the churches in which they serve. Their workloads are managed and where necessary restricted in order that they might have the time to pursue their studies and to grow as reflective practitioners.

Methodism has shared with the wider Church the understanding that it is appropriate for the presiding minister at the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to be an ordained presbyter. It has however also maintained that it is not in the interests of the Church and the mission of God for God’s people to want for the sacrament because of a shortage of presbyters. Where there is deprivation of reasonably frequent and regular celebration of the sacrament, the Conference will authorise suitably qualified and nominated lay people (or deacons) to preside. These authorisations are granted annually and are only to be used within the named circuit. Presbyteral probationers are often deemed by the circuit to be the most suitably qualified people to be granted an authorisation, though some will in conscience decline to be nominated.

Probationers are appointed to their first circuits through direct stationing. Circuits are asked to give careful consideration as to whether a vacancy they will have would be suitable for a probationer. That the vacancy includes ministry in a local ecumenical partnership does not make it unsuitable for a probationer; indeed, having been trained in ecumenical settings many probationers yearn to work closely with Christians of other traditions. However, there is a number of issues that need to be explored before matching a probationer with an appointment including a LEP can be considered. In particular:

- Is the responsibility within the LEP such as can be appropriately exercised by a probationer who does not have pastoral charge? Is (are) the partner(s) aware that the authority of the probationer is circumscribed and that the Superintendent or another presbyter will need

also to be involved in the life of the LEP? These questions need particular consideration where there is an alternating pattern of (sole) ministry (and it is 'the Methodist turn').

- Where ministry is shared in the LEP, consideration needs to be given to the balance and the appearance of balance between those exercising pastoral responsibility. Will a probationer be regarded as an equal by an ordained minister of another denomination? Or will s/he appear to be the assistant? In either case, how will the ordination and reception into Full Connexion of the presbyter be celebrated as a significant moment?
- Should a probationer be placed in an appointment where s/he will be expected to preside at the Lord's Supper in the LEP? The Faith & Order Committee was clear in 2005: 'it is inappropriate for lay people and probationer ministers authorised by the Conference to preside at Methodist services of Holy Communion in a Local Ecumenical Partnership where the Church of England is a partner church.' Some of the historic Free Churches would not share the Anglican opinion on this matter but careful conversations need to be held with our partners about whether or not it is fitting for someone still preparing for his/her ordination to preside at the table.

Our guidelines on suitable probationer appointments state that there should be 'LEP involvement only if written agreement between the circuit and ecumenical partners about the probationer's involvement has been obtained'. The agreement needs to be with the appropriate authority in the partner denomination and the District or Connexional Ecumenical Officer should be consulted about who that will be in each case. The written agreement should indicate that conversation has taken place around these three points and any particular local issues and indicate that the ecumenical partner(s) is/are fully aware of what it means for a probationer to exercise ministry within the LEP. A copy of the agreement together with the constitution of the LEP should be submitted to the Conference Office with the profile of the appointment.

Careful scrutiny is given to these matters in order that a probationer might flourish in her/his appointment and in many places a local ecumenical partnership will prove suitable ground for such flourishing. Once the probationer is in her/his appointment, the Superintendent and District Probationers' Secretary should ensure that ecumenical partners have appropriate opportunity to contribute to the support of and the reports on the probationer.

The Conference Office

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