

## LAY ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (1975)

At the Conference of 1974 two Memorials were submitted as follows:

'42. Deaconesses and Sacrament of Lord's Supper. – *The Nottingham (Mission) (22/6) Quarterly Meeting* (Present: 53, Vote: Unanimous) requests the Conference to grant dispensations, where necessary, to ordained deaconesses for the administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion in the homes of our members.'

'43. Lay Agents and Sacrament of Lord's Supper. – *The Exmouth and Budleigh Salterton (23/13) Quarterly Meeting* (Present: 58. Vote: Unanimous) requests the Conference to review the question of the Lay Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, especially in regard to circuits which make appointments of lay agents with pastoral responsibility under S.O. 244 and then apply for a dispensation for the persons so appointed to administer the Sacrament in churches within their pastoral care.'

The same reply was given in each case. It was:

'The Memorials Committee understands that the question of the 'Lay Administration of the Sacrament is to be considered by the Faith and Order Committee during the Connexional Year 1974/75 and recommends that this Memorial be referred to that Committee.'

### 1. Theological Stance

Some sentences from our report on Ordination to the Conference of 1974, and adopted by that Conference, express the theological point of view from which we consider this matter:

'But as a perpetual reminder of this calling (to be the Body of Christ to men) and as a means of being obedient to it the Church sets apart men and women, specially called, in ordination. In their office the calling of the whole Church is focused 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.'

'Furthermore, we see in such a view of the ministry a sufficient reason why it should normally be ordained Ministers who preside at the eucharist. The eucharist, which sacramentally expresses the whole gospel, is the representative act of the whole Church, and it is fitting that the representative person should preside.'

This theological stance with its reference to 'normally' and 'fitting' leads logically to Standing Order 011:

'*Lay Administration.* (1) A Circuit which considers that any of its churches is deprived of reasonably frequent and regular administration through lack of ministers may apply for the authorisation of persons

other than ministers to administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper when appointed to do so on the circuit plan.'

## 2. Deprivation

The question here is: what do we mean, and what should we mean, by claiming that a church is deprived of reasonably frequent and regular administration through lack of ministers? The present practice of the Committee on Lay Administration, which acts for the Secretary of the Conference in the matter, working on a rule of thumb that a church should have a monthly Lord's Supper if so desired, is to divide the number of churches in a circuit by the number of ministers and after taking into account the mobility of the ministers, the size of the churches, the availability of supernumeraries, sector ministers and other ministers without pastoral charge and the number of churches with less than two services per Sunday, if the result is five or more to agree that a condition of deprivation exists.

In framing our answer to the above question we wish to make three points, each of which leads us to the same conclusion:

- (1) Lay administration apart, very few of our people consider themselves deprived of the Lord's Supper. For a number of reasons, many people in our smaller churches would not feel deprived if the Lord's Supper were 'planned' only once a quarter or even less. And this, not for the reason advanced, for example by the Church of Scotland, that infrequency stresses the importance, but the opposite. As for celebrations in homes or in hospital most of our people would find a Scripture reading and a prayer adequate to their need.

We are aware of the objection that if this situation, which we regret, were improved there might be an increased demand for Lay Administration. Our answer is, first, that we have to deal with Methodism as it is now, and second, as we shall argue later, increased demand might well be met by the ordained ministry. We would welcome such a demand and would encourage it, but the fact that it does not at present exist means that situations of genuine deprivation are very few.

- (2) The question of ministerial priorities needs careful examination in this context. If the administration of the Lord's Supper is seen as a top priority for a minister then, in our judgement, many more celebrations could take place than is now the case. The recognition of this priority is particularly important where, as a result of a growing realisation of the proper place of the Lord's Supper in the life of the local church, the demand for eucharistic worship increases. Celebrations in homes and hospitals, where they are required, should also be included. It could well be that the need is not for dispensations for the unordained, except in a very few cases, but for a reappraisal of the sacramental theology and practice of the ordained ministry.
- (3) There could be much more flexibility exercised within circuits (the inevitable unit at present) in the arrangement of celebrations of the Lord's Supper than is now the case. Some use could be made of week-nights, though there are obvious limitations; some of united sacramental services both within Methodism and outside it. But it is the hours of Sunday which most lend themselves for this purpose. If we were to break away from the

11 and 6.30 complex and feel free to 'plan' sacramental services at any hour when the people could conveniently come together and the minister conveniently be present we could meet the sacramental needs (both what they are and what they ought to be) much more effectively than we do now. The monthly celebration referred to above would present few difficulties. Easter Day would not be easy to arrange in some circuits but we are not convinced that the difficulties even there are insurmountable.

These three considerations lead us to the conclusion that there should be a tightening up of our practice in the granting of dispensations for laymen (including deaconesses) to preside at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. If there are few situations of deprivation now and if, by the adjustment of ministerial priorities and the exercise of flexibility in 'planning', more – perhaps many more – sacramental services conducted by ministers become possible, then we would require fewer dispensations to be granted to lay people. In our judgment the number used by the Committee on Lay Administration of the Sacrament should be raised.

### **3. Memorials 42 and 43 (1974)**

Both these Memorials link presidency at the eucharist with pastoral care. The argument behind them seems to be that if a person is authorised in a local church to have a share in the pastoral care of the flock then that person ought also to be able to preside at the Lord's Table, whether it is in the church or in a home.

We do not find this argument convincing. Admittedly, there has usually been in the history of the Church universal some degree of association between pastoral care and presidency at the eucharist: and we are hardly in a position to question the rightness of that, since one of the factors in the rise of our own Methodist ministry was the desire of the Methodist people to receive the sacrament at the hands of the men from whom they received the ministry of preaching and pastoral care. But no Church, including our own, has ever held that all who exercise any measure of pastoral care (in Methodism one thinks of class leaders) thereby become the proper persons to preside at the Lord's Supper. Contrariwise, in all Churches the eucharist may be presided over by any person who has been ordained to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Church as a whole, even though he may hold no local pastoral responsibility for the particular place or group in which the sacrament is being observed. As for deaconesses, there seems to us to be no case for the intrusion of 'Word and Sacrament' into their ministry of pastoral care at this point. On the contrary, it is our view that such occasions as are described or assumed in the two Memorials are opportunities for clear demonstration that the local society (43) and the members in their houses (42), both with their 'pastor', are not self-contained units but part of a larger whole, part of a circuit, part indeed of the Church universal. The introduction of the ordained minister as 'representative person' at this point is evidence of universality.

If in addition the Memorials are assuming situations of deprivation, and the words 'where necessary' in Memorial 42 imply this, we consider we have answered this above.

We therefore suggest the following reply to Memorials 42 and 43 (1974):

The Conference holds that some degree of pastoral responsibility does not of itself constitute an entitlement to the administration of the Lord's Supper. It draws attention to the existing Standing Order 011 which provides for cases of deprivation.

*(Agenda 1975, pp. 253-6)*