

LAY PRESIDENCY AT THE LORD'S SUPPER (1984)

B. LAY PRESIDENCY AT THE LORD'S SUPPER

1. At the Conference of 1983 a Notice of Motion was tabled by a minister and a layman from the Liverpool District in the following terms:

Conference, recognising that the strong desire for a close link between pastor and celebrant, leads congregations served by lay ministers to desire their own pastor to officiate at Holy Communion, and believing this to be a right desire, asks the Faith and Order Committee to re-assess the criteria for granting dispensations to lay persons to preside at the Lord's Supper.

The Conference did not vote on the issue, but referred the whole matter, without prejudice, to the Faith and Order Committee for discussion and report (Daily Record No. 9 June 30th 1983).

2. The present arrangement is governed by S. O. 011. The Committee referred to in paragraph (3) of that S. O. is the Committee for Authorisations of Lay Persons to preside at the Lord's Supper. That committee simply applies the formula set out in paragraph (1) of the S. O., which reads as follow:

A circuit which considers that any of its churches is deprived of reasonably frequent and regular celebration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper through lack of ministers may apply for the authorisation of persons other than ministers to preside at that sacrament when appointed to do so on the circuit plan.

The Notice of Motion was sent to the Faith and Order Committee because it requested a change in the basic criteria, and therefore in S. O. 011 (1), and not simply a change in its application.

3. The formula in the S. O. is as old as Methodist Union. The original Deed of Union included a paragraph that dealt with the period of transition when circuits with different traditions would be amalgamating. The paragraph begins,

The general usage of the Churches or denominations whereby the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered by Ministers shall continue to be observed.

Some nine lines later we read, 'Where however it can be shown that any Church is deprived of a reasonably frequent and regular administration through lack of ministers the Circuit concerned may apply to the Conference for the authorisation of persons other than ministers to administer the Sacrament.' (Minutes 1932, p. 303.)

This particular paragraph was deleted from the Deed of Union when the period of transition was thought to be over, but the provision for the authorisation of lay persons has remained virtually unchanged.

4. When the statement, *Ordination in the Methodist Church*, was issued by the Conference of 1960, it carried an Appendix re-affirming the position set out in 1932. By a curious mischance it is not now clear whether the resolution of Conference covered the appendices as well as the statement; nevertheless, the summary presented in the appendix was an accurate account of the situation as it was then, and is now. The S. O. on procedure was re-affirmed in 1968. The matter was raised again in two memorials in the Conference of 1974, which were referred to the Faith and Order Committee. A comprehensive answer was made by the Committee and accepted by the Conference of 1975. This answer begins by drawing attention to a second statement on Ordination made in 1974, which gives reasons why it should normally be a minister who presides at Holy Communion. The answer then alludes to S. O. 011 and goes on to define 'deprivation', to urge ordained ministers to give greater priority to arranging services of Holy Communion, and to conclude that there should be, not a relaxing, but a tightening up in our practice of granting authorisations to lay people. Furthermore, the contention that pastoral charge should carry with it the right to preside is considered and rejected. The answer concludes with the words: 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.
5. In adopting this statement, the Conference asked for further attention to be given to the distinction between probationers and other lay people in the matter of authorisation, because at that time they were considered separately. Consequently by a statement of 1976 this distinction was removed.
6. A Notice of Motion in the 1978 Conference asked that the Faith and Order Committee and Stationing Committee should 'consider' the criteria for the granting of dispensations. This was done and the position taken in S. O. 011 was duly re-affirmed.
7. It is clear from this evidence that, though questions have occasionally been asked, the Conference has never wavered from the position taken at Methodist Union. Authorisations have always been regarded as a means of meeting a need that cannot be met by the work of ordained ministers. They have never been regarded as a right accorded to lay people in pastoral charge.
8. It is necessary to ask, therefore, whether any new factors have arisen that require a change in this established position. There are three, and they need to be considered separately.
9. In the first place, there is in some parts of the Methodist Church a far greater interest in and awareness of the service of Holy Communion as an expression of the Gospel and its fulness than pertained in 1932. Some congregations ask for weekly celebrations. This is a movement much to be encouraged. It does not, however, call for a change in Standing Orders. There is no rule about what is 'reasonably frequent and regular celebration' other than the very

general 'rule of thumb' by which the Committee for Authorisations operated in 1975. If a Church wishes for a weekly celebration and the exigencies of planning make only monthly celebration possible, then that Church may reasonably be said to be deprived. Provided a request is made in these terms, the Committee for Authorisations should, all other things being equal, accede to it. We believe it does so already.

10. The second new factor is the growing realisation that there is but one ministry expressed in a variety of ways and shared between ordained and lay. In the light of this realisation all lines of demarcation are being scrutinised afresh. We in Methodism have come to recognise that we have been slow in making demands upon and giving responsibility to our lay people, and that the reputation we enjoy in the Church at large for the employment of lay people is largely undeserved. We are now beginning to understand what collaborative ministry means.
11. The third factor concerns the growing need in missionary situations in this country. These are to be found in very different cultural areas, such as urban estates, new towns and the inner city, where christian presence is small. The situation from which the Notice of Motion arose was one of these areas. Methodism is at present unable, due to shortage of both finance and personnel, to maintain full-time ordained ministry in many of these areas, but the appointment of suitable lay people under S. O. 581 allows these areas of mission to be served.

Such lay people need to be recognised as representing and leading the Church in every respect.

12. Much of the argumentation for the Notice of Motion related to an individual case, but the request itself was for a general re-assessment of the criteria. The arguments, when generalised, appear like this:
 1. The celebration of Holy Communion relates closely to the pastoral and missionary aspects of the Church's life. This means that the question of who presides is more than a technicality; it is a matter of the proper expression of the whole life of the congregation.
 2. The presence of an ordained minister from another part of the circuit almost inevitably means the absence of the lay person in pastoral charge. So the link between celebration and pastoral care is lost.
 3. Where lay and ordained share together in full-time ministry in a circuit, it is important to demonstrate that the ministry of the lay assistant is not regarded as second best.
 4. The Methodist Church is not opposed in principle to the presidency of lay people at Holy Communion. The restriction is a matter of order and order ought not to be allowed to impoverish worship or inhibit mission.

The conclusion of this argument is that the criteria for the giving of authorisations should be modified so that a lay person with particular pastoral and missionary responsibility in a local Church should always have authorisation if it is requested. There is no suggestion that circuits or districts

should be allowed to decide the matter themselves, nor that the present system of application to a connexional committee should change.

13. The Faith and Order Committee recognises the weight of these arguments and is anxious that every possible step should be taken to strengthen the hand of those who are striving to advance worship, mission and pastoral care, as three integrated aspects of the Church's being. The Committee is not persuaded, however, that a radical departure in principle from our established position is the best way to do this. And there are dangers in accepting the full import of the Notice of Motion.
14. The Committee points out that the idea of collaborative ministry, in which ordained and lay persons share ministry together, does not imply the dissolution of the distinction between them; nor does it weaken the meaning of ordination. Ordination in the Methodist Church is authorisation to act as a person representative of the ministry of the whole Church. This includes a ministry of word and sacrament, and appropriately the presidency at the Eucharist. Lay people provide most of the preaching in Methodism, exercise most of the pastoral care and teaching, and fulfil a wide range of essential ministries, but this does not mean that they should also function as ordained ministers. There is no essential reason why a lay person should fulfil a function normally carried out by an ordained minister.
15. Secondly, the picture of the local congregation and its pastor celebrating the Lord's Supper is a stirring one, but there is the need to maintain a careful balance between the church as local congregation and the whole Church. Every service of Holy Communion is a celebration of the whole Church, and it is important that it should be so understood. This is one reason why presidency is linked with ordination. Certain people with a specific calling are designated by the Conference as representatives of the whole Church for this particular purpose. In this way the relationship between the local congregation and the whole Church is carefully maintained.
16. Thirdly, each congregation of the Methodist Church is part of a circuit. The ministers appointed to have pastoral charge of the several congregations and to conduct their worship are appointed in the first place to the circuit; one of the essential purposes of this polity is that the work of the ministry should bind together the several congregations in Christian fellowship. This principle applies equally to 'dispensations'. The authorisation granted by the Conference to a person not ordained as a presbyter to preside at the Holy Communion, empowers the recipient to do this throughout the specified circuit, and only there. It is granted to the person named, but it also constitutes an authorisation to the Superintendent to include that person among those whom he or she appoints on the Circuit Plan to preside at the Lord's Supper. This is one of the ways in which our Methodist pattern of working tries to express the universality of the whole Christian Church.
17. Fourthly, the immediate beneficiaries, if a re-assessment on the lines indicated were made, would be the lay assistants, referred to in paragraph 11. Many such serve the Church at present; many are local preachers; some become candidates for the ministry. Their service is invaluable, especially in a time of ministerial shortage. They remain, however, **assistants**. It is important that

their position be distinguished from that of ordained ministers. If it is not, if they are granted authorisations by virtue of their share in pastoral responsibility, there will be present in our midst two kinds of 'minister of word and sacraments'. On one hand there will be those who have been appointed by the Conference, ordained and granted all the rights and duties of being in Full Connexion. On the other, there will be those who have been appointed locally, who lack those rights and duties, and who will not have been presented to the Conference at all. There are great dangers in this situation, not least the danger of injustice towards those who will be giving much of the service required of an ordained minister without being one. The Methodist Church recognised these dangers when lay pastors were employed in the past, and took the necessary action. The Church must learn from this experience.

18. For these reasons, the Committee does not believe that a radical departure from the policy that has been operated in Methodism since Union is called for. But note must be taken of the points made in paragraphs 9 and 11 above. There are some situations where a lay person signally represents the Church in a particular area and has a position of leadership in worship and mission under S.O. 581. Even where there are sufficient ordained ministers in the circuit to maintain frequent communion, that area may have such a sense of identity, and the involvement of the lay person in the area may be so complete, that it may be reasonably said that the worship and witness of the community there would be seriously impeded if the lay person were unable to preside at Holy Communion. It is to be hoped that such circumstances are rare, for they imply a weakness in our circuit system, our stationing policy, our use of resources, or indeed in all three. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that such situations do exist and, while they exist, the Church must take whatever steps are necessary to meet them. The Conference, therefore, directs the Committee for Authorisations to consider, in conjunction with the Faith and Order Committee, ways of recognising situations such as those referred to here and in paragraph 11, and thereafter to recommend the granting of authorisations in such cases.

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report on Lay Presidency at the Lord's Supper.

(Agenda 1984, pp.24-28)