

THE ROLE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT IN ORDINATION SERVICES (1996)

Introduction

- 1 The following Memorial (M22) was presented to the 1995 Conference:

The Cumbria Synod (R) (Present 121. Vote: 111 for, 4 ag, 6 neut) believing that we should take seriously the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers, and in the light of the increasing call for the laity to be fully involved in the “Ministry of the Whole People of God”, suggests that the Vice-President should be directly involved, with the Officiating and Supporting Ministers, in the laying on of hands in the ordination of Presbyters. The Synod, therefore, asks the Conference to agree to this with immediate effect.

- 2 The Conference replied as follows:

The Conference notes that proposals similar to that of the Cumbria District Synod were made to the Ministerial Sessions of the Conferences of 1984 and 1985 but were not adopted. In 1987 the Ministerial Session of the Conference adopted a report which recommended that the Vice-President should read one or more lessons and should present Bibles to the newly ordained presbyters – practices which have obtained since that Conference. Because the business arose in the Ministerial Session of the 1983 Conference, none of the reports was presented to the Representative Session. In order that the Representative Session may have an opportunity to consider the arguments for and against the Cumbria District’s suggestion and to express its mind on it, the Conference refers the Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1996.

Discussion during the 1980s

- 3 As the reply of the 1995 Conference indicates, the question of lay involvement in the ordination of presbyters was extensively discussed in the Ministerial Sessions of the Conference during the 1980s. In 1983, a notice of motion was tabled ‘that the Conference rules that only ordained ministers shall lay hands on the heads of the candidates at the Ordination Service’. The Conference did not adopt this motion, but referred it to the Faith and Order Committee, which in 1984 presented a report which set out arguments for and against the motion, and concluded that its adoption would be “inopportune and might well inhibit a proper expression of our doctrine”.
- 4 The 1984 Conference was not willing to adopt the Faith and Order Committee’s report but referred it back to the Committee “for further consideration”. In 1985, the Committee proposed to the Conference “that power should be given to the President to invite, if he so wills, a lay person to join with him and the other ministers in the laying-on of hands. (This person might be, though need not be, the Vice-President.)”

- 5 Once again, the Conference proved unwilling to adopt the Faith and Order Committee's recommendation. Instead, the 1983 notice of motion was adopted: "The Conference rules that only ordained ministers shall lay hands on the heads of candidates at the Ordination Service".
- 6 The arguments on both sides of the debate were finely balanced and both in 1984 and 1985, the Faith and Order Committee itself was unable to achieve unanimity about its proposals. The case for and against change has not altered in the last decade and many of the arguments which appear below were employed in 1984 and 1985.

Two understandings of ordained presbyteral ministry

- 7 Though there are many views held among Methodists about ordained presbyteral ministry, it may be helpful to identify two different approaches which could influence the response to the matter under review. These approaches were described in the Report of the Commission on the Two Sessions of the Conference in 1987. Paragraphs 8 and 9 include quotations from that Report.
- 8 . . . one view of ordained ministry would stress its historical continuity with the past, its representative character on behalf of the whole church, and the corporate responsibility of all ministers to watch over one another, to maintain fidelity to the gospel, and to regulate their common life. This view stresses that ministers are ordained by those previously ordained.

(Agenda, 1987, p. 722)

This view points to the 'givenness' of ordained ministry, deriving by historical succession from Christ himself. It is not necessary to adopt an over-literal view of that succession or to argue for "unbroken continuity" to accept the theological point that revelation by incarnation implies a historical *continuum* whereby we have access to that revelation. Pastoral ministry is passed on by those who have received it.

- 9 Another view insists that the ordained ministry is one among many forms by which the church exercises the ministry of Christ, and that it is accountable to the whole church. This view would place emphasis upon lay participation in the ordination service and in decisions about admission and discipline, if ordained ministry is to be truly representative of the whole.

(Agenda, 1987, p. 722)

This second view regards all ministry, under Christ, as given to the Church. Each ordination is an act by which the Church commits or delegates it afresh to a new generation of representative ministers.

The case for the status quo

- 10 The first view of ordained ministry, identified in paragraph 8 above, supports the *status quo*.

- 11 Methodism's usage is that only ordained ministers of the Word and Sacraments lay hands on the heads of candidates for presbyteral ministry. This has obtained since Methodist Union in 1932 and reflects earlier practice. The principle that only those who were in connexion with the Conference received others into connexion was firmly established from 1791. Ordination by prayer and the laying on of hands by ministers in full connexion was the usage of Wesleyan Methodism from 1836, though the Conference of that year deliberately avoided using in the Ordination Service any minister who had been ordained by John Wesley, lest too much weight be placed on tactile succession. The Primitive and United Methodists, for the most part, did not include the laying-on of hands in their ordinations.
- 12 The practice of ordination by prayer and the laying-on of hands by those already ordained is widely accepted across most Christian traditions. Whilst this should not conclude the matter, there would need to be a very clear understanding of the meaning of any change, in order that it might be intelligible and acceptable to other Christian traditions. Furthermore, in Methodism theology often develops from usage; many of our most prized doctrines had a pragmatic origin. Unless lay participation in the laying-on of hands is shown to be urgently and theologically necessary, it would be wise to avoid new practices which at some future date might be difficult to interpret or which might be used as a basis for a theological position at variance with the theology which lay behind their introduction.
- 13 The *status quo* is consistent with our sacramental usage. Baptism is normally administered by an ordained minister; normally an ordained minister presides at the Lord's Supper. Consultation with the Superintendent is required before anyone other than an ordained minister may baptize; authorisation by the Conference is needed for anyone else to preside at the Lord's Supper. Ordination is not described in our documents as a sacrament, but the laying-on of hands by ordained presbyters is an act representing the whole Conference and often, through ministers from overseas, other Conferences. Presbyters are not simply representatives of the ordained presbyteral ministry but of the whole Church:
- The whole people of God . . . are called, all of them, ordained and unordained, to be the Body of Christ to men. But as a perpetual reminder of this calling 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 focussed and represented and it is their responsibility 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. (Conference Statement on Ordination, 1974 : *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, pp.135f)
- 14 The Cumbria Synod's Memorial refers to 'the priesthood of all believers' in support of its recommendation. It is important that there should be no misunderstanding of what Methodism means by 'the priesthood of all believers' or of the place of ordained persons within it. As the draft Conference Statement, *Called to Love and Praise*, says:

... the New Testament directs us to the priesthood of the *body* of believers, rather than the priesthood of *every* believer. This latter emphasis is not necessarily wrong, but it is much more individual-centred than the language of Scripture, which stresses the inter-dependence of believers. Nevertheless, in the churches to which Paul wrote, each person has a Spirit-endowed gift. This did not mean that everyone could do everyone else's task, but that everyone had both a gift and a task. (*Agenda* 1995, p.192)

The Statement, *Ordination in the Methodist Church*, adopted by the Conference of 1960, makes it clear that

the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' is that we share, as believers, in the priesthood of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself. . . . Into that priesthood of Christ we are taken up by faith, and we in our turn, and in self-identification with Him, offer ourselves in utter humility and obedience as a living sacrifice to God. We are 'priests unto God', and therefore 'take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience', as we are enjoined in the Covenant Service. So the doctrine does not mean that every Christian has the right to exercise every function and administer both sacraments. For it is not an assertion of claims, but a declaration of our total obedience. A Methodist Minister is a priest, in company with all Christ's faithful people; but not all priests are Ministers. (*Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, p.130)

Thus 'the priesthood of all believers' does not mean that "every Christian has the right to exercise every function" and does not in itself support the contention that lay persons should join ordained presbyters in the laying-on of hands. As argued in paragraph 8 above, it belongs to the office and work of those ordained to presbyteral ministry to ordain others, by prayer and the laying-on of hands, to that same ministry.

Further support for this view is to be found in the Doctrinal Clause (Clause 4) of the Deed of Union:

... in the exercise of its (sc. the Methodist Church's) corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.

- 15 A similar point may be made in respect of 'the Ministry of the Whole People of God', to which the Cumbria Synod also refers. It is one thing to say, as we should, that the whole Church has a ministry to exercise and indeed that every Christian has a ministry to exercise. It is quite another thing to contend from this basis that all ministries are interchangeable. As the 1984 report of the Faith and Order Committee (see paragraph 3 above) put it:

Lay people are the source, support and partners of the ordained ministry. Lay people share vitally in the process of testing the call of candidates to the ordained ministry. . . . Lay ministry has its own characteristic richness and variety. It is vital that, at a time when we hope to identify, authenticate and develop lay ministries appropriate to our age, we do not diminish either lay or ordained ministries in their relation to each other. There is real danger, in our present situation, that we clericalise the laity, and use our ordained ministers in ways that mute the ministry of word and

sacraments and their exercise of discipline. (*Ministerial Session Agenda 1984*, p. 9)

The case for change

16 The second view of ordained ministry, identified in paragraph 9 above, supports the case for change.

17 In these days when the variety of ministries is recognised and the integration of different ministries within the life of the Church is so important, ordained and lay persons should work together and be seen to work together in all circumstances where that is possible. Past practice, uncritically accepted, is not a sufficient reason for confining any task or function to the ordained.

18 Clause 4 of the Deed of Union asserts that

Those whom the Methodist Church recognises as called of God and therefore receives into its ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call.

If ordination represents 'the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call' then one argument for limiting the action to ordained presbyters is removed. The whole Church can, and indeed must, recognise that a particular person has received a call from God. This is best expressed by the involvement of a representative lay person in the action of ordination itself.

19 Those who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13) were not passing on a gift which they themselves possessed but embodying, in a symbolic act, the Holy Spirit's appointment of the two men to their missionary task. This is clear from the fact that it was to the whole church at Antioch that Paul and Barnabas reported back (Acts 14:24-28). If the important point is not that those who commissioned the apostles were prophets and teachers, but that they were representative leaders of the church, there is no reason why the imposition of hands in ordination should be restricted to those ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

20 Lay people already engage in significant sacramental acts. It is commonplace for them to share in the distribution of the elements at the Lord's Supper. (It is true that without the authorisation of the Conference, they do not preside; but then there is no suggestion that they should preside at ordinations.) Lay people are deeply involved in the calling, encouragement and selection of those who are to be ordained and they play an equal part with ordained presbyters in the standing vote which receives ordinands into full connexion. It would be a fitting climax to all these processes if lay people shared with ordained presbyters, as representatives of the whole Church, in the tactile act of ordination.

21 The arguments on both sides have, up to this point, referred to 'lay persons'. The Cumbria Synod's memorial, however, refers particularly to the Vice-President. If the foregoing case for the involvement of lay persons in general is upheld, the Vice-President, who clearly exercises a special representative rôle, is ideally qualified to share in the laying-on of hands. Since several

ordinations take place simultaneously during each Conference, the current President is not able to preside at all of them. Our usage is that the President or the President's deputy should preside. The deputy has nearly always (though not invariably) been a former President. It would be appropriate for former Vice-Presidents to share in the laying-on of hands at ordinations at which the current Vice-President could not be present.

Deaconesses and deacons and the Vice-Presidency

- 22 The office of Vice-President of the Conference may be held by a deacon or deaconess, who, according to our recently revised understanding, cannot be regarded as a lay person. Both the 1993 and the 1995 Conferences overwhelmingly adopted a resolution affirming that "the Methodist Church recognises and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal". Unless there is a change in our regulations as to eligibility for Vice-Presidential office, therefore, it will sometimes happen that the Vice-President is a deacon or deaconess, not a lay person. The Cumbria Memorial takes no account of this fact.
- 23 It may be judged, however, that the issue raised in paragraph 22 need not influence the Conference's decision on the Memorial, one way or the other. Those who support the *status quo* hold that no one other than a presbyter should lay hands on ordinands. If those who argue for the involvement of the Vice-President in the tactile act are more concerned that a representative person who is **not** a presbyter should assist the President and other presbyters in this act than that he or she should necessarily be lay, then it will not significantly affect their case if the Vice-President happens to be a deaconess or deacon.

Conclusion

- 24 The Faith and Order Committee has given careful thought to the arguments for and against change. It is clear that ordained presbyters will always have an essential part in the ordination of new presbyters. What is at issue is whether the participation of another representative person (the Vice-President or the Vice-President's deputy) in addition to ordained presbyters would detract from and confuse what is taking place or add something to it. The Faith and Order Committee believes that there are strong arguments both in favour of the *status quo* and in favour of change. On balance, the Committee's view is that the arguments for change are not sufficiently strong to counteract the ecumenical, theological and pragmatic arguments in favour of the *status quo*. Moreover the Vice-President and other lay persons already exercise important rôles in ordination services. In addition to the Vice-President and his/her deputy, the person deputising for the Secretary of the Conference is often a lay person. The whole congregation, the majority of which is not ordained, joins in the declaration, "They are worthy", and thus assents to the ordination.
- 25 The Faith and Order Committee, therefore, while strongly supporting the case for the involvement of lay persons alongside ordained presbyters in ordination services, advises the Conference that, in its judgement, neither the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers nor the affirmation of the ministry of the whole people of God requires the Conference to introduce lay participation in the laying-on of hands. There can be, and must be, partnership between lay and

ordained in ordination services as in all Church life, but this does not mean that all must share in the same actions. The Committee is not persuaded that a sufficiently strong case can be made for a significant change to a usage which the Methodist Church shares with the vast majority of Christians.

- 26 Nevertheless, the Committee judges that in practice too many presbyters are often involved in the tactile act, and that this creates an unhelpful impression. Frequently, hands are laid on a candidate by the President, the preacher, the Secretary, the divisional representative, the overseas representative and the candidate's chosen assisting minister, sometimes accompanied also by the assisting ministers chosen by other candidates. While there is need to indicate that the ordination of presbyters is a collegial act, the college does not need to be so extensively represented. The Committee believes that it would be better if only the President, the ordinand's chosen assisting minister and another assisting minister, who might appropriately be the overseas representative (if a presbyter), were to lay on hands. Amendments to Standing Orders are supplied in resolution 3 below. Circumstances are different, however, in the Cymru District, where few ordinations take place at any one time, and where a large number of presbyters is unlikely to be involved in the tactile act. The Faith and Order Committee understands that the Cymru District would not wish the number of assisting ministers at ordinations governed by S.O. 495 to be restricted to two.
- 27 The opportunity has been taken, in bringing these amendments, to simplify S.O. 719 and to introduce a reference to prayer in S.O.s 495 and 716, as well as providing for the laying on of hands to be restricted to the President or a deputy and two assisting ministers (other than in the Welsh context).

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the report and resolves that it shall be the Conference's further reply to Memorial M22 (1995).

The Conference reaffirms the usage that only ordained presbyters shall lay hands on the heads of candidates at the Ordination of Presbyters.

The Conference adopts the following amendments to Standing Orders:

- (i) renumber the existing S.O. 495 as 495(1); and for "by the laying-on of hands at a service conducted by the President or by his or her deputy, assisted by other ministers", substitute "in a service at which the President or a deputy shall preside".

- (ii) add, as S.O. 495(2):

"Each ordinand shall be ordained by the laying-on of hands with prayer by the President or a deputy, assisted by other ministers in accordance with Standing Order 719, one of whom may be nominated by the ordinand."

(iii) in S.O. 718(6), for “during the same Conference by the laying-on of hands at a service conducted by the President or by a deputy, assisted by other ministers”, substitute “in a service held during the meeting of the same Conference, at which the President or a deputy shall preside”.

(iv) add, as S.O. 718(6A):

“Each ordinand shall be ordained by the laying-on of hands with prayer by the President or a deputy, assisted by two other ministers in accordance with Standing Order 719, one of whom may be nominated by the ordinand.”

(v) for the existing S.O. 719, substitute:

“719 Ministers assisting at Ordinations. (1) Anyone assisting at an ordination in accordance with Standing Order 495(2) or 718(6A) shall be either:

(i) a minister in full connexion or a minister of the Irish or another autonomous conference;

or

(ii) a person ordained to the ministry of the word and sacraments in a church whose ministry is recognised by the Methodist Church.

(2) No person shall be invited to assist under head (ii) of clause (1) above unless the connexional Probationers Oversight Committee is satisfied that he or she meets the requirements there laid down, has been made aware in writing of the view of the Methodist Church that to participate in the laying-on of hands in a Methodist ordination service implies the intention to ordain to the presbyterate in the Church of God, and has subsequently indicated that he or she is willing to participate. Where necessary the Faith and Order Committee shall be asked to investigate a particular case.”

(Agenda 1996, pp.205-212)