

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2002 REPORT

WHAT IS A PRESBYTER?



The **Methodist** Church 

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission

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Introduction

The 2002 Conference has before it a number of reports about major issues, including

An Anglican-Methodist Covenant , and other ecumenical conversations; Episcopacy; Leadership; the Connexional Allowances Committee's Review of Stipends ; and the report entitled Releasing Ministers for Ministry which has been produced in response to the discussion of a previous report 'Flexible Patterns of Ministry'.

Ordained ministry is a major issue in each of these reports. In producing the report Releasing Ministers for Ministry it became apparent that a clear understanding of the Methodist Church's view of presbyteral ministry needs to be established in order to enable the connexion to engage in the conversations about the major issues before it. That understanding then needs to be expressed in our Standing Orders.

To this end two working groups were established to work in parallel with those working on the report Releasing Ministers for Ministry . One looked at the Law and Polity issues, and the fruit of their discussions is a proposed set of Principles to form a new introduction in Standing Orders to Part 7: Ministers and Deacons . These proposed new Standing Orders are included in section 6 of the report Releasing Ministers for Ministr y

The other working group included members of the Faith and Order Committee and attempted to clarify the Methodist Church's understanding of presbyteral ministry. The fruits of its work are to be found in the following report, which has been discussed and commended by the Faith and Order Executive and the Faith and Order Committee.

The Report

1. The starting points for this discussion are

- the *Deed of Union* (particularly Clause 4) (*note 1*)
- the 1974 Statement on Ordination (*note 2*)
- the ordination services, most recently that in the 1999 *Methodist Worship Book* (*note 3*)

The development through the various strands of Methodist tradition of Methodism as a Church with an ordained ministry is historically complex. In general, however, it can be said that as the various connexions of societies took on the marks of a Church (without losing completely the marks of being a movement), so those who exercised oversight of the movement and led it by example in worship and mission took on some of the roles of the parochial clergy (without losing completely the marks of being 'extraordinary messengers'). (*note 4*)

The *Deed of Union* and the 1974 Statement were written in this context. Moreover, they reflect the fact that when they were written British Methodism had only recognised one order of ministry within the Church, namely that of the minister (presbyter). Consequently they do not distinguish between reception into full connexion and ordination in general on the one hand (*note 5*), and the particular calling and role of a presbyter on the other. In 1995, however, the Conference reaffirmed the judgement of the 1993 Conference that the Methodist Church recognizes and has received the Diaconate from God as an order of ministry, and so the 1998 Conference began the practice of receiving members of the Methodist Diaconal Order into full connexion and ordaining them in a process that is analagous (but not quite parallel) to that for presbyters. The 1999 *Methodist Worship Book* therefore contains ordination services for both presbyters and deacons.

There were major reports on deacons in 1993 and 1995. This report is therefore primarily concerned with presbyters. It fills out and is consonant with the description of Methodism's understanding of presbyteral ministry in the proposals for *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* . (*note 6*) A parallel paper on *What is a Deacon?* is being discussed by the Methodist Diaconal Order and will be shared with the rest of the connexion and brought to the Conference in a future year. (*note 7*)

2. The *Deed of Union* seeks to define the relationship between those who are ordained and the whole Church. The relevant parts of Clause 4 state that

“Christ's ministers in the church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation and have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides his gifts severally as he wills”

the Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs to a particular order or class of people, but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.

For the sake of church order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments.”

Put negatively, the Deed of Union is keen to prevent particular types of understanding of priesthood or a priestly caste being applied to Methodist ministers and, by inference, particular types of understanding of what it is to be a church being applied to the Methodist connexion. (*note 8*) Put positively, it suggests that being a minister (presbyter) and acting as such is a particular form or expression of a **vocation** or **calling to discipleship** . This general vocation or calling to become women and men of God constantly growing into the full stature of Christ is shared by all those who constitute the Church. As such, the ministry of presbyters is interdependent with all other forms of ministry (lay or ordained) within the ministry of the whole people of God. Neither the ministry of presbyters nor the ministry of the whole people of God can be dissolved in favour of the other. Neither can be said to have priority over the other. Each requires the other.

3. The Deed of Union, therefore, does not say that presbyters are different from other disciples in the whole people of God. Still less does it say that they are better than them. Yet it still wishes to emphasise that there is something distinctive about them. To do this it proposes the concept of 'representative selection'. This lends itself both to speaking of presbyters as signs of the presence of Christ in the church and the world, and also to encapsulating the relationship between the discipleship of presbyters and the ministry of the whole people of God (although the former is not explicit in the Deed itself). *(note 9)* It is this concept that the 1974 statement on Ordination seeks to develop in terms of 'representative persons' as it attempts to state an understanding of presbyteral ministry which would apply as much to those serving in sector appointment as it does to those appointed to circuits. It begins explicitly with the Church's calling to exercise discipleship in worship and mission and goes on to say:

“as a perpetual reminder of this calling and as a means of being obedient to it the Church sets aside 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 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.”

4. The starting point must therefore be the calling of all God's people to share in a priestly ministry before God and in the world, in worship, mission and service. The particular ministries of presbyters and deacons can only be understood within this context, as focusing, expressing and enabling the ministry of the whole people of God. As such, all Methodist ministers (presbyters) who are ordained and in full connexion are thereby authorised by the Conference to be public people who represent God-in-Christ and the community of the church (particularly the Methodist Church and its Conference) in the world, and the world and the community of the church in Christ before God, as they seek to serve the needs of the Kingdom in the power of the Spirit. They do so in who they are, what they do and what they undergo, by

- focussing the presence and activity of God-in-Christ in the church and the world, by both embodying the love of God and also pointing to its otherness.
- offering the church and the world constantly to God through Christ
- helping the church and the world to see themselves and each other more clearly in the light of God's grace and justice
- representing and acting on behalf of Christ and the universal church (both geographically and historically) in a particular time and place
- leading others to play their appropriate parts in fulfilling the same calling. *(note 10)*

5. Presbyters never cease to be disciples. The particular form of their vocation cannot therefore absolve them from **participating** in the worship and mission of the church as a disciple along with all the other disciples *(note 11)* . At the same time the particular form of their vocation leads them into **coordinating**

the other disciples in their worship and mission, and to **equipping** them for it. Thus in the 1999 Ordination service we find the following addressed to the ordinands:

In his (i.e. God's) name you are

*to preach by word and deed the Gospel of God's grace;
to declare God's forgiveness of sins to all who are penitent;
to baptize, to confirm
and to preside at the celebration of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood;
to lead God's people in worship, prayer and service;
to minister Christ's love and compassion;
to serve others in whom you serve the Lord himself.*

*These things are your common duty and delight.
In them you are to watch over one another in love.*

*In all things, give counsel and encouragement
to those whom Christ entrusts to your care.
Pray without ceasing.
Work with joy in the Lord's service.
Let no one suffer hurt through your neglect.*

and addressed to God about those being ordained

*Grant them unfailing love for those people among whom
you appoint them as pastors and teachers.*

*May they boldly proclaim your truth
and faithfully celebrate your sacraments.*

*Give them wisdom and patience
in their witness and service*

6. The ministry of presbyters can therefore be summarised and characterised under three headings.

- It is a ministry of **word** .
This includes (formal and informal) preaching, evangelism, apologetic, theological and prophetic interpretation, teaching and the articulation of faith and human experience.
- It is a ministry of **sacrament** .
This includes presiding at acts of celebration and devotion, especially baptism (and, in the wider sense of sacramental acts, confirmation) and eucharist.
- It is a ministry of **pastoral responsibility** .
This includes oversight, direction, discipline, order and pastoral care.

All ministers share in this Pastoral Responsibility . It is exercised collegially on behalf of the Conference and involves 'watching over' God's people in love. Hence the "Conference shall in its Ministerial Session engage in pastoral consideration of the number and state of the Societies and in pastoral conversation on the Work of God and on pastoral efficiency" (*note 12*) and the Agenda of the Ministerial Synod includes a discussion of "What is the state of the work of God in the District?" (*note 13*) . In this process all Methodist ministers who are ordained and in full connexion are understood to represent both the *catholic* and the *apostolic* nature of the Church. In being stationed they are all sent to particular situations in the church and in the world to bring the goals, insights and resources of the wider church, of Christian history and of the Biblical tradition to bear on them. They therefore exercise a ministry of visitation to particular groups of disciples and particular situations in the wider world, having spent time watching, praying, waiting on God and sharing the fruits of it all with colleagues (including Supernumeraries, for whom prayer, waiting on God and supporting colleagues may be the major emphases of their continuing ministry).

Pastoral Responsibility is therefore to be distinguished from Pastoral Charge which applies only to those ministers who are appointed to Circuits to fulfil particular ministerial duties within them. (*note 14*) This links with the phrase in the Deed of Union which states that those ordained by Conference (sc. as Presbyters) have "a principal and directing part in these great duties" (*note 15*) which are the responsibility of the whole church. This means guiding congregations, groups and individuals in their explorations of the ways of God and their responses to the grace of God. As such, it includes elements of discipline and spiritual direction as well as pastoral care.

Pastoral Responsibility and Pastoral Charge need to be distinguished in their turn from pastoral care and pastoral work. Pastoral Care is a concern that is shared by the whole Christian community for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of other people. Pastoral Work refers to particular tasks or acts of pastoral care which are allocated to or undertaken by an individual lay-person, lay worker, deacon or minister (presbyter) in the active work, or supernumerary deacon or minister.

All such ministry is, as the word implies, **service** : service to God in service to the church and the world. Its pattern is the ministry of Christ. This commits the presbyter to engaging in the wider servant ministry to the world in which all God's people share, whereas the primary task of the deacon is to focus that ministry in particular. It also profoundly affects the spirit in which the ministry is exercised, and imparts a distinctive nature to the way in which each of the core expressions of presbyteral ministry is undertaken. Thus the way that a minister (presbyter) exercises a ministry of pastoral responsibility is essentially shaped by the fact that she or he serves. (*note 16*)

7. Virtually none of the individual activities under these headings is exclusive to presbyters. Moreover, even those few that normatively are exclusive, such as presiding at the celebration of Holy Communion (*note 17*) , at Confirmation and some functions of discipline and oversight, are parts of wider processes which are undertaken collaboratively with diaconal and lay colleagues. In particular, the pastoral responsibility of the Conference which presbyters embody and represent is delegated and shared by the Conference with other groups in the connexion (e.g. Church Pastoral Committee; Church Council; Circuit Leadership Team; Circuit Meeting; District Policy Committee; District Synod) and with particular office

holders (e.g. class leaders, pastoral visitors). For this reason and also because the Conference which the presbyters represent is made up of both lay and ordained, whereas they by definition are ordained, their exercise of pastoral responsibility on behalf of the Conference only comes to mature fruition when it is linked again with the proper responsibility of lay people and, where they are present, of deacons who are participating in leadership within those other groups. In the various places to which they are sent presbyters are primarily accountable to the Conference and secondarily to the local people in their particular context. There are local lay leaders who are primarily accountable to the local people whom they represent and secondarily to the Conference. Again, pastoral responsibility only comes to full realization when that of the ordained and that of the lay interact, just as the Conference itself is made up of ministers, deacons and lay-people.

8. Nevertheless, even if each of the ministries of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility is shared to some extent or another with lay-people and deacons, the combination of them is exclusive to and definitive of the presbyter. This is consonant with the Deed of Union's emphasis on ministers having "É. *no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people*" yet having "É *a principal and directing part in these great duties*." with the result that "É. *special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised*" . Moreover the very fact these ministries are combined imparts a distinctive nature to each of them.

9. The Methodist Conference therefore ordains ministers (presbyters) to exercise a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility in and on behalf of the church catholic. At the same time it receives into full connexion with itself those who are called to exercise their ministry through the Methodist Church (and only ordains those whom it also receives into full connexion). (*note 18*) They are thereby constituted as a body of ministers who enter a **covenant relationship** with the Conference. At the heart of this mutual relationship both the ministers and the Conference have appropriate privileges and responsibilities. Under the will of God and their obedience to it, the ministers are accountable to the Conference for the exercise of their ministry and for their execution of the Conference's vision and will. At the same time the Conference is committed to deploying them all appropriately and to providing them with the resources and support necessary for them to fulfil their ministry (and in this way is accountable for them) (*note 19*) .

10. As people who represent the Conference, all Methodist ministers who are ordained and in full connexion share a **collegial responsibility** for embodying, exercising and sharing with others (lay and ordained) in the courts of the church and elsewhere, the Conference's oversight of the church's engaging in worship and mission, both as it gathers in Christian community and as it disperses in the world. The Conference is committed to enabling the Methodist Church to fulfil its calling in response to the needs of God's Kingdom by discerning (amongst other things) how its ministers may best be deployed in the light of their individual gifts and circumstances. At the same time all Methodist ministers who are ordained and in full connexion are called to respond wherever they are most required (in the collective view of the Church expressed through the Conference) to meet those same needs. They are therefore deployed as individuals to enact this collegial responsibility. To this end they are all stationed by the Conference. Some are stationed within particular appointments, others without appointment or

with permission to study. Wherever possible they are all linked together with other ministers in teams for mutual supervision and support.

11. This collegial responsibility also maintains one of the original emphases of the body of Mr. Wesley's preachers and helpers which eventually developed into the body of Methodist Ministers (Presbyters), namely that of being something like a religious order. The inscription in the copy of the Large Minutes and the successor to them given in the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries to all those preachers and helpers who were received into full connexion said "As long as you freely consent to, and earnestly endeavour to walk by, these Rules, we shall rejoice to acknowledge you as a fellow-labourer". (*note 20*) Over the years, however, the emphasis has moved from this to that of being an order of ministry. There are, however, still residual traces of being a religious order, expressed in Ministerial Synods and other meetings. The phrase in the new ordination service which follows the description of what presbyteral ministers are to do in God's name - "These things are your common duty and delight. In them you are to watch over one another in love" - is an attempt to restate the importance of this dynamic.

12. Recalling, then, the summary of what a presbyter is (para 4 above), and bearing in mind the exploration of key terms just conducted (paras. 5-11), it is possible to describe the characteristics, tasks and accountability which a presbyter endeavours to fulfil as follows.

The Characteristics of a Presbyter (What is a presbyter like?)

- A presbyter is a person of faith, committed to living as a disciple of Jesus Christ
- A presbyter has a strong sense of God's calling to ministry, which is tested and affirmed by the Church
- A presbyter is of good character, committed to the pursuit of holiness and life-long learning, and faithful to apostolic doctrine
- A presbyter is obedient, accepting Connexional discipline, "our doctrines" and the principle of stationing
- A presbyter is firmly rooted within Methodist tradition, but draws on and is enriched by other ecclesiastical traditions
- A presbyter is a 'whole' person, interconnected with others through family, friendship or other close relationships

The Tasks of a Presbyter (What does a presbyter do?)

- A presbyter prays - personally, representatively and publicly
- A presbyter studies the Bible and other sources (*note 21*) intelligently and appropriately, in order to "*interpret those sacred stories of our community, so that they speak a word to people today*" (*note 22*)

- A presbyter is actively involved in planning, leading and participating in acts of worship and acts of mission, and in developing new forms of worship and mission in ways that are sensitive and responsive to the particularities of the context in which she or he ministers
- A presbyter presides at Holy Communion and at Baptism and Confirmation (*note 23*)
- A presbyter shares in pastoral responsibility with other presbyters, usually exercising oversight in Christian communities, offering leadership and vision, and ensuring that decisions are made according to Methodist practice
- A presbyter is responsible, in collaboration with appropriate church bodies, lay officers and any ordained colleagues, for the pastoral care of church members (though not always 'doing' the care at first hand)
- A presbyter represents the church in the community
- A presbyter seeks to grow as a woman or man of God, and enables and encourages others to grow in their discipleship, and to be equipped for evangelism and mission
- A presbyter ensures that his or her family and personal commitments are not neglected

The Accountability of a Presbyter (To whom is a presbyter accountable?)

- To God
- To the Church — through a “covenant relationship” with the Conference in which a presbyter accepts the authority and support of the Conference and is in turn entrusted with representing them to others
- To ordained colleagues — through “watching over each other in love” communally and collegially in *ad hoc* relationships and groups, staff meetings, Ministerial Sessions of Synod, and the Ministerial Session of Conference
- To others — through behaving with integrity, competence and according to the best standards of practice towards those to whom she or he ministers

NOTES

1. Clause 4 of the Deed of Union goes back to the signing of the Deed in 1932 and some parts beyond it to 1926, 1924 and 1908. The current form of the Deed of Union is to be found in part 1, Volume 2 of The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church published annually through the Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough.

2. Methodist Conference 1974 Ordination in Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order 1933-1982 Methodist Publishing House 2000 pp.108-119

- 3.** *The Methodist Worship Book Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough 1999 pp. 297ff.*
- 4.** *In the early years of the Methodist movement, those who were received into full connexion with Mr. Wesley were to be itinerant preachers who were sent to particular regions to travel on a ministry of visitation around a particular 'circuit'. Wesley described them as 'extraordinary messengers'. Their role was to help people to discern the needs of the Kingdom in new situations. They were not meant to emulate or replace the residential or parochial clergy, although as Methodism gradually separated from the Church of England and the various Methodist denominations came into being ministers had to adopt some aspects of that role.*
- 5.** *Reception into full connexion and ordination are linked inseparably in Methodism, and both are essential in the making of a Methodist minister. In general terms, if ordination relates to a minister's status and role in the church catholic, reception into full connexion concerns his or her particular relationship to the Methodist church.*
- 6.** *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing 2001 (particularly pages 44-60).*
- 7.** *Similar work on What is a Lay Worker? and What is a Local Preacher? is also being considered.*
- 8.** *For the most recent formal statement of the nature of the Church adopted at the 1999 Methodist Conference see Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough 1999, reprinted in Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Vol. 2 Part 1 Methodist Publishing House 2000 pp.1-59.*
- 9.** *This two-fold understanding in which presbyters represent both Christ and the Church is to be found in para's 144 and 149-150 of An Anglican-Methodist Covenant Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing 2001.*
- 10.** *This paragraph does not go beyond the meaning of the 1974 statement on Ordination, but uses different language to develop the tradition further.*
- 11.** *Thus presbyters are expected not to direct from a distance but also to participate in the activities of the church categorised under the various headings of Our Calling, a programme devised to enact a report adopted by the Methodist Conference 2000 [Agenda p. 303ff] entitled Our Calling to Fulfil , and building on the Statement of Purpose of the Methodist Church adopted by the Methodist Conference 1996.*
- 12.** *Deed of Union Clause 23 (f)*
- 13.** *Standing Order 1002 (C) (8)*
- 14.** *Standing Order 005 (v) (vi) and SO 520*
- 15.** *Deed of Union Clause 4*

16. *Similarly, the fact that a deacon does not exercise pastoral responsibility or have pastoral charge profoundly affects his or her ministry of service and means that she or he focuses it in new and distinctive ways.*

17. *Where people other than ordained ministers (presbyters) are authorised to preside at celebrations of Holy Communion this is treated as a departure from the norm in order to ensure that the people of God can share in communion in situations where they would otherwise be deprived of it [see Standing Orders 011, 713(5), 766(5) and the Criteria for Authorising Persons other than Ministers to Preside at the Lord's Supper in Book VI Part 8 of CPD].*

18. *The 2001 Conference adopted a report on The Position of Ministers and Deacons of Other Churches who are Recognised and Regarded or Authorised to Serve [Agenda pp.403-412], and amended Standing Orders to make it plain that those of other churches who are recognised and regarded as ministers or deacons admitted into full connexion with the British Conference exercise their accountability for their ministerial practice and for their general vocation and development as ministers or deacons to the British Conference in the first instance and, through the Conference, to their own conference or church.*

19. *It can be argued that in its formal approval of the 'stations' and formal acceptance of the reports of ministerial character and discipline, the Conference 'accounts for' its ministers and deacons.*

20. *The inscription in the Large Minutes persisted until they were superseded by J. S. Simon's Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline in 1905. The inscription then appeared in Simon until Methodist Union in 1932.*

21. *Methodism has often looked to Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience (both personal and social) as sources of authority. Wesley urged the reading of many books to make someone a better 'person of the one book [i.e. the Bible]': today there are electronic media and other sources as well as books.*

22. *the ordination service of the Methodist Church in Singapore*

23. *See footnote 15 for presidency at Holy Communion. Only presbyters preside at Confirmations, but other people (not just presbyters) may officiate at Baptisms.*