



Called to preach?

This leaflet aims to help you and the Methodist Church explore a sense of call. It explains the steps involved in becoming a Local Preacher in the Methodist Church.

God's call

God reaches out to all people in love, and invites us to love in return through worship and service. As we respond, we are called to discipleship. Our individual gifts, circumstances and opportunities will shape the different ways we become disciples. For some, God's call becomes a specific prompting to fulfil part of that call through leading worship and preaching. The Church seeks to support everyone in their individual calling and also seeks to recognise, release and enable those called to specific ministries.

This is a joint voyage of exploration for the individual and the Church:

- The Church seeks to discern
 - what God is doing in a person's life;
 - how God wishes the Church to respond to that person.
- The individual seeks to discern
 - what God is prompting them to do;
 - how that may relate to the life of the Church.

This leaflet may be part of that exploration for you. If you believe that God may be calling you to ministry, then you need to explore what form that should take, and whether it is that of a Local Preacher.

Being a Local Preacher

The rules and regulations of the Methodist Church appear in a book whose title is shortened by many to 'CPD'. In full, it is 'The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church'. CPD says this about Local Preachers:

'Preachers are called of God, to be worthy in character, to lead God's people in worship and to preach the gospel.'

Let's start at 'to preach the gospel' and work back from there.

To preach the gospel

The gospel is the good news to be preached to all who will listen.

Preaching:

- is the proclaiming of the good news of a loving God who, through the life, death, resurrection and living presence of Jesus Christ, offers salvation to the human race.
- has its roots in the Bible and in the experience of the Church – including the preacher's own experience
- depends on the activity of the Holy Spirit for its effectiveness in preparation, delivery and result.

Preaching relates God's saving activity (as recorded in the Bible) and the experiences of people living in today's world. To do this, preachers need a working knowledge of scripture and theology and an understanding of the world in which we live. Part of that understanding comes from the preacher's own 'workaday' world and their own observing, reading, listening, reflecting and involvement. A preacher's knowledge and understanding of the Bible grows in reading and reflecting on scripture and in considering how the Church has understood and applied it.

Initial training aims to develop a preacher's:

- spirituality;
- knowledge and understanding;
- practical skills.

Development of these three areas (challenging and exciting!) helps preachers relate knowledge and understanding of scripture and theology to our contemporary world. It is a demanding responsibility then to communicate that through preaching!

To lead God's people in worship

Worship is giving glory to God. Christians worship when they come together:

- to praise God;
- to celebrate with thanksgiving the life, death, resurrection and living presence of Jesus Christ,
- to rejoice in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

They may themselves be inspired in the process, but that is not the primary aim. The main purpose is to glorify God. The function of the Local Preacher is to enable people to do this.

In leading God's people in worship, preachers need not only a sense of the flow and changing moods of worship but also an ability to enable others to enter into worship. Initial training provides new preachers with guidance and support in skills that help people offer worship to God through their music, voice, movement, art, creativity and (indeed) their lives.

To be worthy in character

'Actions speak louder than words.' *Who we are* says more than *what we say*. A preacher's life outside the pulpit and away from public worship is as important as what they do and say when leading worship and preaching. People take notice of the sermons we preach in our daily living. Although none of us is perfect and none is 'worthy', there needs to be a match between the lives we lead and the gospel we celebrate and preach.

Called of God

This is where the leaflet began. Your call may not be the kind of heavenly voice or vision of a Cecil B de Mille movie. It may be that you see a need, or hear the gospel message, or that someone else has seen in you the gifts and graces of a preacher. Whichever way God's call comes, the compelling result is the same!

You feel an insistent pressure that this is something you ought to do, despite all your reservations, doubts and very good reasons. This is the place where most preachers begin. Our stories often speak of how we came to realise gradually that God really did mean us to be preachers in spite of our inadequacies and failures.

That gradual realisation, or the appreciation that this is not the appropriate moment or the appropriate form of ministry comes through checking out the call, through 'testing' the call to preach.

Testing a call could well involve you in:

- considering prayerfully if this seems to be part of your call as a disciple of Jesus;
- talking it over with someone who knows you well and who is able to be honest with you;
- sharing your sense of call with your minister.

The Methodist Church has a responsibility to test your call. How it does that is spelled out later in this leaflet. Sometimes, people discover that they are not called to preach, but are called to another form of Christian service. Sometimes people recognise that at this point in their lives it is not appropriate to pursue the ministry of preaching. Although this can sometimes feel uncomfortable and disappointing, the Church values and appreciates you all the more for your readiness to offer and to be considered in this way.

Once a call to preach is tested and confirmed and training is completed, a person is admitted as a Local Preacher – normally a lifetime office.

Being local

Originally, the term ‘Local Preacher’ showed the difference between those who stayed in a local area and those who moved around the country as ministers (‘Presbyters’). It was usual for Local Preachers to live and work locally. They knew (and were known by) the local congregations and the local community. They related local concerns to scripture and theology. Many of these characteristics still remain true even now.

We should not be surprised at this if we believe that God raises up people from amongst us to lead worship and preach. God acts for the benefit of the Church and for the fulfilment of God’s mission. The Church needs Local Preachers in order to hear the gospel spoken from the context of the world. It needs to hear the expression of Christian faith tested and deepened in the home, on the farm, in the workplace, in good times and bad. This is the way Local Preachers complement the ministry of presbyters in the worship and preaching life of the Church.

A note to preach

The road to becoming a Local Preacher begins when you are recommended to the Local Preachers’ Meeting, by the Church Council of the local church where you are member, or by a minister, or by a Local Preacher. If the meeting approves, you receive from the Superintendent minister a written note authorising you to assist a Local Preacher in the conduct of services in the Circuit. This is the ‘On Note’ stage.

At this point you will have to sign a Safeguarding declaration. This requirement is part of the Methodist Church’s commitment to safeguarding children and young people.

The Local Preachers’ Meeting is held every three months. Your developing spirituality, knowledge and understanding, and practical skills will be considered at each meeting during the ‘On Note’ stage. These are key moments for you and the meeting to reflect prayerfully and carefully on your being called to preach. It is at this point that a tutor will be appointed to guide you through the studies.

Alongside you throughout the ‘On Note’ stage you will have an experienced preacher as your mentor. Your mentor is in charge of every service in which you take part during the ‘On Note’ stage. Your mentor (and other preachers attending worship where you take part) bring a report to the Local Preachers’ Meeting on how you are developing and progressing.

The Meeting may question if this really is the ministry to which you are being called. It may be content to extend the ‘On Note’ stage for a further three months. When it accepts that you are ready to take responsibility for leading worship and preaching, then it will arrange for you to conduct a full service in the presence of two preachers – one of whom may be your mentor). Ask to see a Service Report Form so you have an idea what you and they are being asked to reflect on.

On Trial

If the reports on this 'trial service' are satisfactory, the Local Preachers' Meeting will move you to the 'On Trial' stage. Your development will continue to be considered every three months. For the first six months of the 'On Trial' stage, your mentor will continue to be alongside you, offering help and encouragement. The 'On Trial' stage lasts between one and five years and is the main period of initial training. The phrase 'On Trial' does not sound an encouraging or positive experience, but your Local Preachers' Meeting will want to make it so for you. After all, they have the T-shirt!

You will follow a training programme validated by the Local Preachers' Studies Board. Most students follow the training course: 'Faith & Worship' where you will receive the help, support and assessment of a Local Tutor. All validated training is designed to equip you to lead worship and preach 'with knowledge, conviction and competence' as CPD puts it.

At about the halfway point in your training, you will conduct a 'trial service' in the presence of two preachers and a church steward. They (and you) will use the Service Report Form again. If you are taking the 'Faith & Worship' course you will have been using it on other occasions too, as part of your course work. The 'trial service' will be reported on at the Local Preachers' Meeting and then you will take part in a short interview where you share the story of your Christian experience, your call to preach and any insights, challenges or difficulties experienced while you have been 'On Trial'.

As you end your training, you will conduct another 'trial service'. This time, normally, one of the preachers present will be a minister. Again, the service will be reported on at the Local Preachers' Meeting and then you will take part in a second interview.

This time you have the opportunity to speak of your growth in knowledge and understanding of the faith, and maturing Christian experience. There will also be a conversation relating to John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons. You will need to satisfy the meeting that you will:

- be faithful to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith and to Methodist doctrinal standards.
- accept and observe the duties of a Local Preacher as described in CPD at SO 563. These are read out at the meeting.

If, after this second interview, the meeting is satisfied that you should be admitted as a Local Preacher, it shall recommend you to the Circuit Meeting. If the Circuit Meeting agrees, it shall approve the person on trial for admission as a Local Preacher.

Admission as a Local Preacher

Following this, you are then admitted as a Local Preacher at a public religious service arranged by the Circuit Meeting. At that service a letter and Bible signed by the President of Conference shall be presented to the newly admitted Local Preacher.

A recurring question

Throughout the On Note and On Trial stages, this is a time for you and the Church to test the call. You may complete the training programme, but that is not an automatic passport. The important question always being asked is 'Are you called to be a Local Preacher?' It is no shame to say, at any stage, 'No, that is not where my call lies'. Such integrity will be respected. Each time your development and progress are discussed, the question remains 'Are you called to be a Local Preacher?' Each occasion is a natural opportunity for you and the meeting to consider further whether local preaching is how your call is to be worked out.

The use of Local Preachers

It is estimated that (overall) about 60%-70% of Methodist services of worship on Sundays are conducted by Local Preachers. Particular circumstances mean that in some Circuits, Local Preachers are used more heavily than the overall estimate and in others, less. Local Preachers are at the heart of our existence as a Church. Methodists encounter God in their experience of worship and preaching. This is a great privilege for Local Preachers and a great responsibility too. Indeed, becoming a Local Preacher might seem too daunting, were it not for the preacher's constant dependence upon the grace of God.

Continuing development

As with initial training, continuing development support in Circuits helps Local Preachers to address:

- their spiritual development;
- their development in knowledge and understanding;
- the development of skills (in preaching and leading worship).

To help the transition from initial training to continuing development, each Local Preacher completes a project within a year of their accreditation and makes a ten-minute presentation on the project to the Local Preachers' Meeting. The Holy Spirit can and does take all this work from initial training to continuing development – and the results are incalculable.

You are not alone as you prayerfully consider a call to preach. The Holy Spirit leads us all in our discipleship of Jesus and the Church, including other Local Preachers are with you in discerning if your call includes becoming a Local Preacher in the Methodist Church.

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