

25. The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate and the Methodist Diaconal Order

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Methodist Church of Great Britain¹ is part of the whole Church of Christ,² called to love and praise God for the sake of the world. As it continues to discern and respond to God's call in the changed and changing contexts of the early part of the 21st century, it is exploring many questions about the form and nature of the ministry it undertakes.³ As part of this work, and in response to a variety of experiences,⁴ the Methodist Church has been challenged to reflect on how it understands and undertakes its diaconal ministry, and how that ministry is focused in those it sets apart as deacons through ordination.

1.2. Within the universal Church, deacons in the British Methodist Church are in the distinctive position of belonging to both an order of ministry and a religious order. The 2013 Conference found that the time was ripe for further reflection on the theology and ecclesiology underpinning this distinctive model of ordained diaconal ministry, and the 2016 Conference further requested exploration of the relationship between the order of ministry and the religious order. This report therefore brings together the following pieces of work:

Resolution 35/4 (2012)

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to explore with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Ministries Committee the liturgical role of deacons within the Methodist Church and, if appropriate, find ways of affirming that.

a. Resolution 44/11 (2013)

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Methodist Diaconal Order, to undertake work on the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate in Methodism, its place within the British Connexion and its place within the universal Church.

1 Referred to hereafter as either 'The Methodist Church', although it is important to emphasise that we differ from other Methodist Churches in our understanding and exercise of ordained diaconal ministry.

2 *Called to Love and Praise (CLP)*, 1999, 4.1.1

3 *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 2018

4 See *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate - Interim Report*, 2016, 1.3-1.4

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b. Resolution 33/2 (2016)

The Conference directs the Methodist Council, with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, to consider whether the religious order should be opened to receive into membership Methodists who are lay or ordained to presbyteral ministry and report to the 2018 Conference.

c. Resolution 33/3 (2016)

The Conference directs the Methodist Council, with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, to consider whether those whom it ordains to the diaconal order of ministry continue to be required also to become members of the religious order and report to the 2018 Conference.

- 1.3. In setting out the Methodist Church's theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate and the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO), this report builds on the thinking of two previous reports: the 1993 report, *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, and the 2016 report, *Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*. It is therefore important that this report is read in dialogue with those documents. As noted in the 2016 report, *What is a Deacon?* (2004) remains an important report and continues to be influential in the formation of deacons offering "some helpful insights into diaconal ministry and the MDO, as understood and experienced at the time; but some of the concepts and thinking underlying that report have now been critiqued or superseded and the MDO's self-understanding has moved on."⁵
- 1.4. This report considers the theology underpinning the diaconate (section 2), the theology underpinning the religious order (the MDO) (section 3), and the Methodist Church's ecclesiological understanding of the religious order (section 4). The final section of the report identifies the questions which will need some further consideration in the light of this report. Before focusing on these topics, two further comments are necessary: first, on the relationship between the order of ministry and religious order; and second, on theological method.
- 1.5. The relationship between the diaconal order of ministry and the religious order
- 1.5.1. Whilst British Methodism makes a contribution to the wider Church as its deacons focus and represent the servant ministry of Christ "as much through being members of a religious order as being part of an order of ministry in Full Connexion with the Conference,"⁶ it has struggled to articulate this contribution more fully. The 2016 Conference therefore asked that the

5 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 1.5

6 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 6.5; *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 7.1

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relationship between the diaconal order of ministry and the religious order was re-examined (see the resolutions at 1.2c above).

- 1.5.2. Therefore, the Methodist Council with the Faith and Order Committee, and through various consultations with the MDO, has explored the nature of the relationship between the diaconate as an order of ministry and the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO) as a religious order and they have come to the following conclusions:
- a. The Methodist Church continues to affirm that the MDO “is a gift of God to the Church to help enable the Church to fulfil its calling.”⁷ The distinctive position of deacons is part of this gift. Within British Methodism the MDO and the role of ordained deacons have “evolved over time as the Church has sought to discern the will of God and remain faithful to its calling.”⁸ The distinctive relationship between the MDO and the order of ministry is part of our response to God’s call, shaping how we share in God’s mission in and for the world. As will be seen in sections 2 and 3 below, there is much convergence in the theology underpinning the diaconal order of ministry and the MDO and there is therefore a coherence in their close relationship.
 - b. Members of the MDO make a life-long commitment, all are subject to the same discipline (of both the MDO and the Conference) and therefore live within the same patterns of oversight and with the same tensions. Members of the MDO expect to serve in different places, to undertake different roles and to participate in different forms of service. These considerations led to the conclusion that the MDO is for ordained deacons in Full Connexion with the Conference and that it is therefore inappropriate for it to be open to lay members or presbyters.
 - c. It was also found that it should continue to be a requirement that members of the MDO be ordained to the order of deacons. The identity and nature of the MDO is bound up with the office of deacon in the Methodist Church in Britain. There is a firm link between the focus of the MDO and the calling of the order of ministry. It is therefore felt appropriate that the two are closely related. Although the separation of the religious order and the order of ministry can be ecclesologically and theologically envisaged, and the two have not always co-existed within the Methodist Church in Britain, there is a coherence in their current relationship.

7 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report, 2016, 1.2*

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- d. Deacons in the Methodist Church should therefore continue to belong to both an order of ministry and a religious order. The present holding together of the religious order and the order of ministry is important for many deacons, and their ministry as a member of one is shaped by their belonging to the other. This is also reflected in many areas of the Church's polity and practice. There is no clear and pastorally justifiable reason for separating the order of ministry and the religious order, and it was found that there is generally either resistance to or a lack of will and energy for such a course of action.
 - e. Furthermore, there was not found to be a strong interest or clear reason to open up the MDO to presbyters and lay people. More recent and renewed interest in religious orders, or in belonging to some form of religious community, has not led to much particular interest in admission to the MDO itself, which is always dependent on discernment of a call to the religious order.
 - f. It is therefore recommended that the Conference is asked to reaffirm that the MDO is a religious order open only to those who are ordained deacons in Full Connexion with the Methodist Conference; and that all ordained deacons in the Methodist Church are also required to be members of the MDO.
 - g. Methodism, like other denominations, has seen a genuine, though limited, renewal of interest in developing religious orders. Further consideration of this is beyond the scope of this report, but the expression of diaconal ministry in the MDO offers a vibrant and creative expression of a religious order and has a particular contribution to make to any further conversations.
- 1.5.3. Although the term 'MDO' has often been used to refer to deacons, this is illustrative of, and has contributed to, past confusion between the religious order and the diaconal order of ministry. It is important to note that the MDO is the religious order. This report reaffirms that the religious order (the MDO) and the diaconal order of ministry in the Methodist Church are coterminous but not the same. As members of the MDO, deacons belong to a religious order, abide by its *Rule of Life*, and commit themselves to a life of witness and service and prayer. Deacons are also ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God and are ministers of the Methodist Church in Full Connexion with the Conference. As ministers of the Methodist Church they are annually stationed to a particular context in order to focus, enable and represent the calling of the whole Church to proclamation of the gospel through witness and service in the world.

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1.6. Theological Method

- 1.6.1. The reaffirmation that deacons belong to both an order of ministry and a religious order is a result of a theological method which pays attention to the story of the MDO and ordained diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church in order to explore further how God is calling and equipping us for mission. Some comment on theological method is therefore needed.
- 1.6.2. Reflection on scripture, tradition and experience underpin, resource and shape the theological and ecclesiological thinking in this report. Much of this reflection can be found in the 1993 and 2016 reports, and attention is particularly drawn to the paragraphs which explore resources from the Bible (section 2, 1993 and section 2.3, 2016), reflect on the ministry of deacons in Christian tradition and in the universal Church today (sections 3-6 and 9, 1993, and section 2, 2016), and describe the story of the Methodist Diaconal Order and the diaconate in British Methodism (sections 7-8, 1993, and section 3, 2016). This material forms the foundation of the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate.
- 1.6.3. Attention has also been given to the experience of Methodist deacons and how the Methodist Church has experienced diaconal ministry. The Methodist Church continues to affirm that the MDO is a gift to help enable the Church to fulfil its calling, “and God has brought many blessings through the ministry of Methodist deacons and deaconesses across the years.”⁹ Giving attention to the experience of deacons and how the Church has experienced diaconal ministry helps us to consider the nature of this gift. Such experience is diverse. Within the MDO itself there are different views of the religious order, the order of ministry and the relationship between the two. Deacons engage in ministry in a range of contexts and in a variety of ways. This diversity is a feature of God’s gift in the MDO, and it is in keeping with the form and nature of diaconal ministry in the universal Church. Many churches acknowledge that *diakonia* is profoundly contextual¹⁰ and that the form of the diaconate or diaconal ministry would be specific to the particular context of the church. From the consultations, it was clear that for many Methodist deacons belonging to a religious order has shaped the form and manner of their participation in the ministry of the Church.

9 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report, 2016, 1.2*

10 See, for example, *The Jerusalem Report, 2012, p.36*

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- 1.6.4. This brings with it the challenge of how such diversity is held in common so that the ministry of deacons is never an individualistic enterprise but part of the ministry of the whole Church. Within the Methodist Church, a deacon's ministry is shaped by the needs and priorities of the whole of the Methodist Church as it seeks to share in God's mission, as well as by the needs and priorities of the particular communities (including the local church communities) in which the deacon serves. Throughout their ministry, deacons may be stationed to very different appointments, sometimes requiring new skills to be learnt, so there can also be significant diversity within a deacon's own experiences of ordained diaconal ministry.
- 1.6.5. The 2016 report noted that the story of the MDO "reveals how both the Church and the Order have sought to respond to the changing needs of the Church and the world. It is a story of pilgrimage; of seeking to respond to God's call to bear witness to and participate in the servant ministry of Christ.¹¹ In its present form, the MDO is a 'response to the call of God in our contemporary context'¹²." ¹³ Attention has therefore also been paid to the story of the MDO and the development of the Methodist Church's order of diaconal ministry. A key feature of that story, and of the consultations with deacons, is that practical action in response to need has often come before theological reflection. Whilst the need for more rigorous theological reflection has been acknowledged for many years,¹⁴ it would be helpful for closer attention to continue to be given to the relationship between theology and action, not least as part of the exercise of diaconal ministry. Deacons are therefore encouraged to continue to reflect theologically on their actions in the different contexts in which they serve, and to encourage those whom they serve alongside also to engage in such theological conversations. It might also be fruitful for attention to be given to this relationship in other areas of the Church's life and as part of its ongoing discernment of God's presence and call.
- 1.6.6. Actions, however, are not devoid of, nor separate from, theology, and our practices, polity and ways of being can reveal our implicit theology. Action indicates how people are theologically shaped and motivated. Actions, from local church relationships to decisions of the Conference, embody our theological understanding. The story of the MDO and the ministry of deacons thus reveal aspects of our theology.

11 *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.2

12 *Methodist Council Report*, 2013, 11.3

13 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 1.2

14 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report* (2016), 3.6-3.10 and 5.1-5.2.

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- 1.6.7. Whilst our implicit theology is brought to light through reflecting on action, thus contributing to the Church's theological thinking, it has not always been accompanied by a consideration of ecclesiology or the ecclesiological implications of actions. The Church is a community called into being by God to participate in God's mission, witness to divine grace, and proclaim the kingdom of God as Jesus did.¹⁵ It is a community that reflects the self-giving love of God in its common life. The Methodist Church continues to participate in God's mission, believing its particular call is to spread scriptural holiness, and this is reflected in the way in which it structures itself, in its particular priorities, and the ways in which its members participate in its ministry. The MDO is a part of this. The relationship between the diaconate and the MDO, and how the processes of the MDO relate to other processes in the Church, therefore reflect what we understand the nature and purpose of the Church to be, and how the MDO is part of the Methodist Church's response to the love and call of God.
- 1.6.8. If deacons in the Methodist Church belong to both an order of ministry and a religious order then we continue to live with a tension, particularly as deacons seek to live out their commitments to both with the sometimes different responsibilities and patterns of oversight involved. There are differences between Methodist deacons and deacons in other churches,¹⁶ just as deacons in other churches differ from one another. This diversity enriches the universal Church, but impacts on, for example, the ways in which deacons may serve in each other's churches. This tension can be understood as part of God's gift in the MDO, revealing something of God's nature, but it requires ongoing rigorous consideration and is part of the Church's continuing conversation about how we share in God's mission.
- 1.6.9. Our theological thinking is thus a piece of practical and contextual theology, paying attention to scripture and to understandings of the diaconate and of religious orders in church history, in Methodism and amongst our ecumenical partners, but also recognising that our current practice and expression of diaconal ministry and of the MDO are important aspects of our theology.

15 *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 2.1.1, 2.1.7

16 Although, as noted at 1.6.3 above, deacons in different churches may exercise their ministry in very different ways.

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2. The Theology Underpinning the Diaconate

2.1. Diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church

2.1.1. British Methodism's theology of ministry begins with its understanding of, and its response to, God, as part of a people called by God to love and praise God for the sake of the world: "This double dynamic of turning to God and turning to the world is central to understanding ministry."¹⁷ The Methodist Church has reaffirmed that the ministry of the whole people of God is the primary and normative ministry of the Church and shapes and determines all other ministries.¹⁸ Ministry is therefore primarily about the witness of the whole people of God in the world.

"...the Methodist Church, as part of the universal Church called into being by God through Jesus Christ, believes that it has a particular call to spread scriptural holiness, to share the good news of God's love and salvation for all. For this purpose, the Holy Spirit guides the Church and gives to its members diverse and complementary gifts so that they may support and encourage one another and engage in witness and service in the world. All of God's people have gifts to be used for the sake of the whole Church for the sake of the world..."¹⁹

2.1.2. Diaconal ministry is therefore the ministry of all of God's people. In different ways and in different contexts all Christians are called to proclaim the gospel and prefigure the Kingdom of God. Living in a new relationship with God through Christ, all members of the Church are called:

"... to confess their faith and to give account of their hope. They are to identify with the joys and sufferings of all people as they seek to witness in caring love. The members of Christ's body are to struggle with the oppressed towards that freedom and dignity promised with the coming of the Kingdom. This mission needs to be carried out in varying political, social and cultural contexts. In order to fulfil this mission faithfully, they will seek relevant forms of witness and service in each situation. In so doing they bring to the world a foretaste of the joy and glory of God's Kingdom."²⁰

17 *Ministry in the Methodist Church, Part B*, 2018, 2.3

18 *Ministry in the Methodist Church, Part B*, 2018, 4.1

19 *Ministry in the Methodist Church, Part B*, 2018, 2.6

20 World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M4

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All members of the church are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for building up the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent.

2.1.3. As part of this, the Methodist Church shares the view of the wider Church that: “In order to fulfil its mission, the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity. The ministry of such persons, who since very early times have been ordained, is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church ... Their presence reminds the community of the divine initiative, and of the dependence of the Church on Jesus Christ, who is the source of its mission and the foundation of its unity. They serve to build up the community in Christ and to strengthen its witness. In them the Church seeks an example of holiness and loving concern.”²¹

2.1.4. The Methodist Church therefore sets apart people to focus and represent the calling of the whole Church through ordination. They are a “sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world,”²² and lead the people to share with them in that calling. The Methodist Church has two distinctive expressions of ordained ministry, the presbyterate and the diaconate. Presbyters are primarily ordained to a ministry of Word and Sacrament²³ and deacons are primarily ordained to a ministry of Witness and Service.²⁴ In common with other churches, in the ordination of presbyters and deacons, the Methodist Church intends to ordain to the presbyterate and the diaconate in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

21 World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M8, M12

22 *Ordination*, 1974, 14

23 In the ordination service, presbyteral ordinands are asked whether they “believe that God has called you to be a Minister of the Word and Sacraments in the universal Church” (*The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.303); *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 2018, 7.4.4.1 following *Ordination*, 1974, 5 states that “Methodist Presbyters are ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the Church of God which they fulfil in various capacities and to a varying extent throughout their lives”; *Clause 4 of the Deed of Union* has “For the sake of church order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the presbyters of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments.”

24 In the ordination service deacons are asked only whether they “believe that God has called you to be a Deacon in the universal church”, although the *Preface* to the ordination service states that “Deacons are ordained to a ministry of service and pastoral care and seek to equip God’s people for service in the world” (*The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.297); SO 701 states that “All Methodist deacons are ordained to a life-long ministry of service and witness in and on behalf of the Church of God, which they fulfil in pastoral care, outreach and worship in various capacities and to a varying extent throughout their lives.”

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- 2.1.5. In the Methodist Church, ordination is to either the presbyterate or the diaconate, unlike Anglican churches, for example, where all those who wish to be ordained to the presbyterate have also to have first been ordained as deacons. The relationship between the two orders of ministry has been described as being “parallel, complementary and distinctive,” the two orders being “separate and distinct, though complementary”²⁵. Three factors indicate that the orders are parallel: ordination, life-long commitment and availability for stationing. It is unfortunate that ‘parallel and complementary’ has been open to misrepresentation when the language of ‘equal’ has been used. The Conference has noted that using accurate language is a powerful process for changing attitudes and assumptions,²⁶ and should be chosen so as to affirm that deacons are ministers of the Church, while avoiding misunderstandings of the complementary and distinctive ministries of deacons and presbyters²⁷, particularly when applied to the roles and functions deacons and presbyters undertake within and on behalf of the Methodist Church. Whilst deacons and presbyters are both ministers in Full Connexion with the Conference, they participate, focus and represent the ministry of the whole people of God in different ways. Consequently, it is recommended that the references to “Presbyters, usually called Ministers” are corrected in *the Methodist Worship Book’s Introduction* to the ordination services and the order for the *Ordination of Presbyters*.
- 2.1.6. Many aspects of the particular ministries of deacons and presbyters are normally exercised in a variety of ways by a large number of Christians, both in the world and in the church. Diaconal ministry is part of the ministry of the whole Church and each of its members. The diaconal order of ministry can, therefore, be understood only within the context of focusing, expressing and enabling the ministry of the whole people of God.²⁸ The *Introduction* to the Methodist ordination services reminds us that “[a]ll Christians are called through their Baptism and by the hearing of God’s word to ministry and service among the whole people of God and in the life of the world.”²⁹ It has further been emphasised that “the entire Church must be diaconal in character if it is to serve as a sign of Christ”³⁰ and that the ministry of Methodist deacons is a means of enabling and enriching the ministry of the whole people of God.

25 *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1995, 8, 13

26 *Signalling Vocation, Clarifying Identity* 2008, 4.1

27 *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.3

28 *The Ministry of the People of God*, 1988, 059, 065; *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.13; *Ministry in the Methodist Church, Part B*, 2018, 7.4.2.3

29 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.297

30 *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.13

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2.1.7. The Methodist Church shares much of its understanding of the diaconate with the wider Church and, like many other churches, it has affirmed the World Council of Churches' description of diaconal ministry: "Deacons represent to the church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in Church life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of congregations: for example, by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfil certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance."³¹

2.1.8. The distinctive vocation of the diaconal order of ministry is witness and service. The following statement about the nature of ordained diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church has been repeatedly emphasised:

"Deacons and deaconesses are a 'focus' for the servant ministry of Christ; through their ministry of caring, the incarnate servant Christ is revealed. They are a 'focus' for the servant ministry of the Church, making visible God's calling to the Church to be a servant in the world. Their servant ministry challenges the Church to respond to this calling. Part of their role is to interpret to the Church the needs and aspirations of the world. Deacons and deaconesses offer Methodism and the wider Church the discipline, spirituality and commitment to community that is part of working out their personal vocation in the context of being a religious order."³²

2.1.9. The ways in which deacons focus the servant ministry of the Church and make visible God's calling to the Church to be a servant in the world are identified in the ordination service. As is stated in 'The Examination' in the order for the ordination of deacons:

In his name you are
To assist God's people in worship and prayer;
To hold before them the needs and concerns of the world;
To minister Christ's love and compassion;
To visit and support the sick and the suffering;
To seek out the lost and the lonely,
and to help those you serve to offer their lives to God."³³

31 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Geneva: WCC, M31, p.27

32 *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.12

33 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.317

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After the ordination deacons are presented with a Bible by the Vice-President (or a past Vice-President) “as a sign of the ministry committed to you this day, and witness to the Gospel by word and deed in the Church and in the world.”³⁴

After deacons are presented with a badge as a sign of the membership of the religious order (see 3.1.3 below), the President then declares:

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ I declare that you have been ordained as Deacons of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Christ. You are to share fully in the life of the Order and to keep its discipline.

Remember your call.

Support the weak
Bind up the broken
Gather in the outcast
Welcome the stranger
Seek the lost

So minister care that you make glad those whom you help in their need.
Let the concerns and sorrows of others be as your own.
May Christ your Master, when he comes in glory,
count you among his faithful servants.”³⁵

2.1.10. In the Methodist Church ordination is linked inseparably with ‘reception into Full Connexion’³⁶ through which deacons enter a covenant relationship with the Conference. At the heart of this mutual relationship, made possible through God’s grace, both ordained ministers and the Conference have appropriate privileges and responsibilities. Deacons are accountable to the Conference for the exercise of their ministry “and for the execution of the Conference’s vision and will,”³⁷ sharing a collegial responsibility for embodying, exercising and sharing with others the oversight of the Conference. At the same time the Conference is committed to deploying them appropriately and providing them with a manse and stipend. All deacons are itinerant and are stationed directly in order to serve where they are needed by the Church.

34 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.322

35 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.323

36 *Ordination in the Methodist Church*, 1960,

37 *Releasing Ministers for Ministry*, 2002, 4.2

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2.2. Witness and Service

2.2.1. In focusing and representing the calling of the whole Church to proclamation of the gospel through witness and service in the world, deacons are a sign of the presence and ministry of the servant Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world,³⁸ and they encourage and enable others to “undertake this ministry with greater effectiveness in their own daily lives.”³⁹ In many different contexts they embody, proclaim and point to the transforming love of Christ and it is their responsibility as representative persons to lead the people to share with them in that calling.

2.2.2. Witness and service are therefore the core emphases of a deacon’s ministry. The two aspects go hand in hand but, across the years (and in some areas of the Church’s life today) there has been a tendency for greater attention to be paid to a deacon’s ministry of service than the ministry of witness; and for service to be equated only with acts of mercy and loving kindness.⁴⁰ This has sometimes led to misunderstandings about a deacon’s role and purpose, impacting both on the ministry of deacons and on the way in which members of the Methodist Church understand and express diaconal ministry. The complexities and difficulties of the notion of ‘servanthood’ have also contributed to misunderstanding. Acknowledging this, the DIAKONIA World Federation⁴¹ has commented:

“The servanthood that is central to diaconal ministry is a costly way of life chosen by those who know their own brokenness and their own need for God’s healing. It can be embraced only by those who have received God’s love and been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Diaconal, servanthood ministry then means being a healing, accepting, encouraging presence to others, enabling them to experience God’s unending, unconditional, love and forgiveness. It includes seeking justice and sharing a vision. It presumes an image of God whose love and care extends to all people. It is a call to be in a relationship with God and God’s world, to accept, support, and comfort, and to equip and encourage others to use their own gifts to fulfil their potential in service and life.”⁴²

38 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 4.2

39 *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 3.3

40 *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 5.2 emphasises “witness through service”. Whilst the thinking in the relevant paragraph remains helpful, the phrase has become problematic and it is therefore now seen as more helpful to our understanding and practice to refer to “witness and service”.

41 A worldwide ecumenical body which, amongst other things, seeks to further understanding of the diaconate.

42 DIAKONIA World Federation, 1998, *Theology Paper*, p.1

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- 2.2.3. The Methodist Church reaffirms that the ministry of witness is a central part of ordained diaconal ministry, and of the diaconal ministry of the whole of the Methodist Church. It is the servant ministry of *Christ* which deacons focus and represent. This will often require them to encourage, enable and equip others to participate in the servant ministry of Christ, to model such ministry in different contexts, and it may involve undertaking particular acts of service on behalf of the whole Church.
- 2.2.4. The 2016 report notes how the work of biblical scholar John Collins has been influential in challenging the widespread tendency to equate diaconal ministry with acts of humble service and mercy.⁴³ Whilst aspects of his thinking have been contentious, “[t]he most important lasting contribution of Collins is the understanding that diaconal ministry is not so much focused on caring for people, vital though that is to our discipleship, so much as fulfilling a commission, whether for the Church or for God.”⁴⁴ Such a ministry of service is therefore not just about caring for others but always involves embodying and pointing to the servant ministry of Christ. Collins’ further work identified that commissioning task as the proclamation of the gospel⁴⁵ (see section 2.3 below).
- 2.2.5. Deacons draw attention to and make visible the presence and servant ministry of Christ following Jesus’ example of loving service, drawing attention to the presence of God in the world, and pointing to God’s kingdom: “[t]hus, it is the self-emptying, self-offering love of Christ that reaches beyond established boundaries, cares for the most vulnerable, seeks healing, justice, liberation and restoration, and so proclaims the Good News of God’s Kingdom which is the foundation of, and template for, diaconal ministry.”⁴⁶
- 2.2.6. As Methodists have reflected on the nature of diaconal ministry, a variety of biblical passages have been significant, including Acts 6:1-6 (see section 2 of the 1993 report and section 2.3 of the 2016 report). John 13:1-17, however, has been particularly influential. It is read during the diaconal ordination service, and the associated imagery of the footwashing has been significant in the life of the MDO (see section 3.4 below). Where there has been a tendency to give weight to verses 12-17, Jesus’ action of washing the disciples’ feet has been understood as an example of how all disciples

43 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report, 2016, 2.3.5*

44 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report, 2016, 2.3.8*

45 J N Collins, 2002, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New*, Leominster: Gracewing, pp.52-58

46 *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.4

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should act and as an ethical imperative to perform acts of self-giving love. Unfortunately, a narrow focus on this interpretation has helped perpetuate the misunderstanding of diaconal ministry described in 2.2.2 and 2.2.4 above. Yet, a fuller reading of the text is helpful. Many commentators have understood verses 6-11 as a symbolic action relating to Jesus' death, revealing and enabling participation in the gospel. Such experience enabled the disciples likewise to perform revelatory actions centred on the Cross, empowering and encouraging them to witness in the world. It is further important to note that the disciples were instructed to wash each other's feet, an encouragement to serve each other in mutual love, thus becoming a visible sign of God's salvific love. As deacons focus and represent the ministry of Christ revealed through the footwashing, they therefore have a role in caring for, nurturing, and equipping members of the Church, building up the community of disciples and sending them out to witness and serve in the world.

- 2.2.7. Although the account of the footwashing read in the ordination service for deacons ends at verse 17, many scholars consider John 13:1-20 as a literary unit concluding with the words "Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives me receives him who sent me,"⁴⁷ and thus pointing to the fuller interpretation of the text described above. Remembering the whole pericope, rather than the truncated account, is therefore important and it is recommended that the text used in the order for *The Ordination of Deacons* is amended accordingly.
- 2.2.8. Enabling the diaconal ministry of the whole Church does not preclude acts of service, and deacons may engage in particular acts of service in specific communities on behalf of the whole people of God. Deacons may be stationed to focus and represent the ministry of the servant Christ in particular contexts of need, and sometimes in contexts to which they do not particularly feel called but which the Church requires of them as part of sharing in God's mission in and for the world. In this way deacons also focus and represent the commitments that all Methodists make annually in the Covenant Service. Deacons therefore need the knowledge, capacity and ability to read the complexity of a community (historical, economic, social, political) and engage with contemporary cultures, to work with others in discerning God's mission in and beyond the church, and the willingness and flexibility to learn new skills and encourage others to do likewise in order to respond to the needs of the world including those of social justice and impoverishment in all its forms.

47 John 13:20 (from the *New Revised Standard Version*)

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- 2.2.9. It is important to note that love for the poor, the vulnerable, the suffering and the marginalised is a characteristic of the ministry of deacons, and this was evident throughout the consultations with the MDO. Within many different contexts deacons revealed a loving concern for those in many different kinds of need, working with local and national organisations and charities, walking alongside individuals, and forming relationships with marginalised communities in order to offer practical care and support, transform unjust structures and practices, and share the good news of the gospel. Acts of mercy and loving kindness continue to be a feature of the ministry of deacons, but are an aspect, not the entirety of it.
- 2.2.10. Wherever Jesus was encountered in impoverishment, community was restored, and a ministry of witness and service involves working for the restoration of community. Recent research revealed that through making connections, building bridges, and creating spaces and opportunities for relationships to form and develop, and through encouraging, nurturing and taking a leading role in a range of communities, Methodist deacons sought to build communities rooted in the self-giving love of Christ.⁴⁸ In building community, deacons point to and embody the love of Christ which brings people into relationship with God and each other. Deacons remind people of Jesus who calls people together, and they witness to and help people discover Christ in their midst. Theirs is a public representative ministry that roots the building of community in the prophetic, transformative, servant ministry of Jesus to which the Church as a whole is a witness.
- 2.2.11. Part of the ministry of deacons is therefore to intentionally support, encourage and build forms of community wherever they are. Whatever kind of appointment they might be in, deacons are invited to form, encourage, facilitate and nurture communities (for example bible studies, circuit staff meetings, supportive groups (in and outside the church), community groups focused around a particular need or concern), to bring different groups or communities together, to look for or create space and opportunities for this to happen, and to build bridges and relationships in a wide variety of ways, and most particularly between a Local Church and its wider community.
- 2.2.12. This may have a pioneering element. In being alert to how God might be working in a particular community and inviting the Church to engage with such communities in new ways, deacons may be involved in forming new communities, including communities of new believers. Such witness

48 Orton, A and Stockdale, T, 2014, *Making Connections: Exploring Methodist Deacons' Perspectives on Contemporary Diaconal Ministry*. Sacristy Press: Durham

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highlights the need for deacons to be rooted in a local church community, to be visibly seen as a representative of the Church, and to work with and build up the community of the Local Church.

2.2.13. The connection between the deacon's ministry and the life of the Church is vital, and an inherent part of ordination and reception into Full Connexion. Deacons have a ministry within congregations in enabling the diaconal ministry of the whole people of God, and a role in building up communities of believers who can walk alongside, welcome and support new believers. For example, it may be that because of a deacon's relationship with a particular community they receive requests for baptism. Part of the deacon's role in preparing the person, or family of an infant or child, for baptism, is to build the relationship between them and the church community, and to work with the presbyter and appropriate members of the church (see further section 2.4.11 below), to ensure that their ministry is part of the Church's life and not something separate or disconnected. Deacons help build relationships between the new believers and the church community. In this respect they may also have a ministry of catechesis.

2.2.14. A deacon's witness is part of a local church community's witness to the life of Christ, and we see from the reflection on John 13 (paragraph 2.2.6 above) that the encouragement to mutual love and service within the community of followers is part of diaconal ministry. A deacon's role and ministry within the Local Church is therefore as important as their role and ministry in the wider community in order for them to fulfil their representative function, and in order for them to build communities which are centred in the transforming, self-giving love of Christ.

2.3. Witness and Proclamation of the Gospel

2.3.1. The Church is a community that hears and proclaims the Word of God.⁴⁹ Since its beginnings the Church has proclaimed the good news of God's love as revealed in Jesus. Such proclamation is the task of all the baptised,⁵⁰ and it can take many forms. It is part of the evangelistic task and involves giving an account of faith and sharing the gospel in a wide range of contexts. Although proclamation can be by word and deed, it involves clearly and explicitly communicating the gospel. Whilst ways of being and actions might contribute to, or shape, the context for proclamation, proclamation itself

49 World Council of Churches, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, 2013, 14

50 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, ordination services, pp.302 and 316.

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is linked to the ministry of the Word. Members of the Church participate in this ministry in a variety of ways and may proclaim the gospel, for example, through individual conversation, speaking within a particular community, participating in public debate, sharing written theological reflection, and preaching. A ministry of proclamation therefore involves more than ways of being, or personal or social actions. It involves the broader task of communicating the gospel message, of evangelism, and of appropriately engaging in public discourse. It requires commitment to theological reflection, and the knowledge and ability to speak about God and faith in a wide variety of contexts.

- 2.3.2. Proclamation has always been a part of the ministry of witness of Methodist Deacons.⁵¹ Following the work of John Collins, deacons are understood as heralds of the gospel, ambassadors or messengers for Christ, proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. Within recent Methodist understanding “Deacons are messengers authorised to proclaim the Good News and intermediaries with a particular responsibility to make connections between Church and World.”⁵² Deacons have a particular part to play in resourcing the Church and encouraging the community of faith to reflect on its response to the needs of the world and the call of God, through sharing insights, reflecting on scripture and offering theological reflections from their particular ministerial contexts, particularly those of need and impoverishment. Today deacons engage in proclaiming the gospel in a wide variety of ways. This may be in funerals and weddings, within fresh expressions of church and worship, during community or church meetings, as part of chaplaincy roles and during civic occasions. As deacons often have a particular role with a particular group (or groups) of people, including the local church community, part of their ministry of proclamation involves translating the gospel message and offering any theological reflection in language that is appropriate and relevant for that situation, which includes using signs, symbols and references that the group(s) will understand. Deacons therefore need excellent skills in communication and to be equipped to reflect and interpret theologically, to contribute appropriately to public debates, and to articulate the Gospel in diverse communities, including in worship with Local Churches. Deacons are

51 As noted in *What is a Deacon?* 2004, “Methodist deacons witness through a combination of service-and-proclamation in their appointments, as envisaged by Bowman Stephenson from the start.” In *Concerning Sisterhoods* he set out the three fields of diaconal work as moral and spiritual education, ministry to the sick, and evangelistic visitation.

52 *What is a Deacon?* 2004, 5.4

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called to witness to the gospel in the Church as well as in the world⁵³ and to hold before God's people the needs and concerns of the world. In many different contexts deacons are required to reflect on and expound scripture, in the light of the faith of the Church and the needs of the world (including café church, Messy Church, funerals, baptisms, during civic occasions, in informal acts of worship or planned services). The Methodist Church understands all of this as preaching⁵⁴ and therefore affirms that preaching is part of a deacon's ministry of witness and service as they proclaim the gospel out of their rootedness in Christ's ministry of self-giving love.

2.3.3. Deacons proclaim the gospel of Christ and may be called upon to preach in a variety of situations and therefore need excellent skills in articulating, interpreting and sharing the gospel in diverse communities, including local church congregations. Enabling God's people to worship God in a wide variety of contexts also often requires the same skills that are developed through training for preaching. Preaching can be a means by which the members of the Methodist Church are inspired and encouraged in their diaconal ministry, through which the needs of the world are interpreted to the Church, and through which the relationship between witness, service and worship are embedded. It is therefore recommended that all deacons are appropriately resourced for a preaching ministry within the Methodist Church and as ordained ministers in the Church of God.

2.3.4. Within the Methodist Church, the place of preaching within the ministry of deacons has been a topic of reflection for a number of years. Many (and sometimes opposing views) have been expressed and the following considerations are noted:

2.3.4.1. Conversations are often shaped by particular images of what it means to preach, some can seem archaic and uninspiring whilst others feel relevant and inspirational. There continues to be a need for preachers who teach, inspire and illuminate scripture for 21st-century congregations, and preaching remains a vital aspect of Methodist tradition and practice and reflects the calling of the Methodist Church. There is, however, a broader conversation for the whole of the Methodist Church about how preaching is understood,

53 Newly ordained deacons are presented with a Bible as a sign of their ministry and "witness to the Gospel by word and deed in the Church and in the world."

54 The guidance on Local Arrangement services, adopted by the 2015 Conference described preaching in this way and noted that preaching thus goes further than testimony, exhortation and other forms of proclamation.

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expressed, resourced and affirmed in the Church for the sake of the world today.

2.3.4.2. Within the universal Church, preaching is well established as part of the ministry of deacons, and it is also an important aspect of their ministry of proclamation. In the World Council of Churches' description of the diaconate preaching is a normative aspect of such ministry (see paragraph 2.1.7 above), and it is unusual for ordained ministers of the Church not to regularly lead worship and preach within Local Churches. Currently, within the Methodist Church, there is a great deal of inconsistency in practice. Some deacons are local preachers, some are worship leaders (which is a local Church Council appointment), some are both and some are neither.⁵⁵ Different practices in how deacons are listed on the preaching plan, and in whether those who are not local preachers are listed as having responsibility for an act of worship, have caused confusion and some pain. In addition, although deacons in the Methodist Church now belong to an order of ministry as well as a religious order, it remains the case that it is their status as a local preacher (or not) which determines whether or not they preach during an act of worship in a Local Church as listed on the circuit preaching plan.⁵⁶ It is also the case that some deacons are admitted to the office of local preacher (a lay office) after they have been ordained. Amidst these inconsistencies it was clear from recent consultations that most deacons (including those who are not local preachers) do 'reflect on and expound Scripture, in the light of the faith of the Church and the needs of the world' (preach), albeit in different ways and in a variety of contexts outside of, as well as including, Sunday worship.

2.3.4.3. During consultations with deacons, concerns have been expressed about the expectation that all deacons will also be preachers. Some do not feel a call to preach, others are concerned that they will be expected to fill the plan leaving less time for other aspects

55 There has not always been a requirement for deacons to be worship leaders.

56 This has not always been the case. All Wesley deaconesses were preachers, indeed they blazed the trail for women preachers. Initially recruited for social work, the first Wesley deaconesses unofficially began to preach at a time when women were banned from doing so, and in 1910 the Wesley Deaconess Order General Committee authorised deaconesses who had already been engaged as deaconess-evangelists to preach. In 1919, as the Conference resolved that women were eligible to be fully accredited local preachers, it also granted permission to local preachers' meetings for those deaconesses already preaching under the 1910 provisions to be received onto Full Plan without further examination.

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of their ministry, particularly within the wider community. There is a difference, however, between whether someone feels called to the office of local preacher and whether someone is called to be a deacon where preaching is part of the ministry. Whether someone is called to a particular ministry in the life of the Church is a matter of discernment for both the individual and the Church. Nonetheless, it is likely that preaching will be a more significant aspect of the ministry of some deacons than others and, given the form and nature of ordained diaconal ministry (which includes participating in the leading of worship in other ways and participating in the life of the wider community on Sundays as well as during the rest of the week), conversations at the beginning of each appointment will be important to clarify expectations with regards to the preaching plan.

- 2.3.5. It is therefore further recommended that deacons are equipped to proclaim the gospel in a wide range of contexts, including within worship and through preaching. Whilst candidates for the diaconate will not be required to first be local preachers, they will continue to be required to be worship leaders and during initial ministerial formation and probation will be equipped and authorised to preach. Expectations regarding the preaching plan will be part of the profile for diaconal appointments and can be worked through as part of the letter of understanding. Deacons will be listed on the preaching plan in the same way as presbyters and will become members of the local preachers' meeting. Some further work will be needed on the process and content of this aspect of the training and formation of deacons, and on any resources which might be offered to deacons who are not already local preachers (recognising that many are worship leaders, have had further training through initial ministerial training or continuing development, and have a wealth of experience).

2.4. Witness, service and worship

- 2.4.1. In the universal Church's understanding of *diakonia*, witness, service and worship are inextricably related. As the Conference has previously noted:

"In the early church, deacons soon took a part in the Eucharist, particularly in distributing the bread and wine to those present and to the absent: their involvement in the liturgy expressing a servant ministry for the spiritual and physical nourishment of the Church."⁵⁷

57 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate: Interim Report, 2016, 2.4.4*

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Such linking of the spiritual and material became a hallmark of the deacon's work, and the liturgical role of deacons has sometimes been more prominent than their role in practical engagement in social care or evangelistic activities.

- 2.4.2. The ministry of Methodist deacons has developed from beginnings in the 19th century revival of the diaconate in the form of deaconess orders where less attention was paid to their liturgical role and the emphasis was on meeting the needs of the poor. Although part of the ministry of Methodist deacons today is to assist God's people in worship and prayer and to hold before them the needs and concerns of the world, there continues to be no clearly defined liturgical role for deacons within Methodism. In *The Methodist Worship Book*, however, they are assigned traditional diaconal roles within 'The Easter Vigil,'⁵⁸ and at the end of the ordination service for deacons the tradition of a deacon dismissing the people and sending them out for witness and service is maintained when the Warden of the MDO says "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."⁵⁹
- 2.4.3. Through dialogue with ecumenical partners and its own reflection on the diaconate, the Methodist Church has been challenged to examine further the liturgical role of deacons in the Methodist Church.
- 2.4.4. A deacon's ministry of witness and service, which includes building community and proclaiming the gospel, shapes their liturgical role. The Methodist Church has affirmed that the entirety of a deacon's ministry is offered as worship to God⁶⁰ and that deacons hold together work, worship, service and proclamation.⁶¹ Through their involvement with worship they help connect the life of the Church and the life of the local communities, and they represent the unity of worship, witness and service. When diaconal work "is recognised and owned by the church, then worship and service are connected and the church is constantly reminded of its calling to serve God in the World."⁶² A proper understanding and exercise of the liturgical role of deacons is central to achieving this recognition and ownership. In exercising this ministry, deacons recall the whole Church to its mission of serving God in the world.
- 2.4.5. The diaconal ordination prayer speaks of a people gathered for obedience, for the proclamation of the greatness of God's name, and of a God who sends

58 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.265, note 4

59 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.328, 35

60 *What is a Deacon?* 2004, 7.8

61 *What is a Deacon?* 2004, 7.8.3

62 *What is a Deacon?* 2004, 7.7

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messengers recalling God's people to service. It recalls the incarnation and the servant nature of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Some general conclusions about the liturgical role of deacons can therefore be taken from the ordination liturgy:

- it is a role which assists God's people;
- it is one in which the needs and concerns of the world are brought to the attention and prayer of the whole church;
- it is one which will proclaim the gospel in both word and deed, model the love and compassion of Christ and give particular attention to those who are most vulnerable;
- above all, it will draw all those in worship, and beyond it, to a consecration of their lives to God.

2.4.6. The deacon's liturgical role is therefore one of witness and service which exemplifies diaconal ministry before the gathered assembly and which challenges those gathered to greater effectiveness in their own witness and service. Some general statements can be made about the liturgical role of a deacon, which should be seen as an exemplar of their whole ministry:

- A deacon proclaims the Word of God;
- A deacon calls the needs of the world to the attention of God's people;
- A deacon challenges and encourages God's people in their own self-offering to God;
- A deacon serves God's people as they offer their worship and prayer.

2.4.7. The deacon's ministry of proclamation has been explored in section 2.3 above, but a further three outworkings of the liturgical role of deacons can be identified: their role at Holy Communion, at baptisms, and at weddings and funerals. None of the roles described in the following paragraphs are exclusive to deacons, but it is sometimes appropriate that it is the deacon who undertakes these things.

2.4.8. Many Christian traditions have maintained or recovered a clear understanding of the liturgical roles of deacons, including the Roman Catholic Church, various churches of the Anglican tradition and the United Methodist Church. At Holy Communion, the deacon's role particularly includes reading the Gospel, leading the intercessions, preparing and clearing the table and dismissing the assembly. This form of liturgical ministry would not be appropriate for every context in the Methodist Church, nor on every occasion that a deacon is present, but it could become a more established part of a deacon's ministry and there are certain contexts where it is especially fitting.

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For example, a deacon could assist in this way at Holy Communion at the Conference and in Synods.

- 2.4.9. The ministry of Extended Communion is particularly appropriate for deacons and embodies the sense of linking the gathered congregation with the wider community. In Methodist practice, Extended Communion is “usually [...] confined to those who cannot attend the Church’s celebration, e.g. the sick and housebound.”⁶³ Whilst in some churches deacons (and others) preside at services of Extended Communion for public worship, this is not within the discipline of the Methodist Church. Neither deacons, nor lay members of the Church, should be asked to lead services of Extended Communion for public worship.⁶⁴
- 2.4.10. It has often been asked whether there are circumstances in which it would be appropriate for Methodist deacons to be given an authorisation to preside at Holy Communion. It has been agreed that Eucharistic presidency is not within the normative sphere of ministry exercised by deacons. In the vast majority of situations, the appropriate liturgical role for a deacon at Holy Communion is that set out in paragraph 2.4.8 above. Therefore, in order not to introduce any confusion between the fundamental nature of diaconal and of presbyteral ministry, deacons should not receive authorisations.
- 2.4.11. In keeping with the wider tradition of the Church, deacons may sometimes baptise, and baptism has been an important part of the ministry of many Methodist deacons. Standing Order O10A permits deacons to administer the sacrament of baptism with the permission of the Superintendent Minister. In many places, deacons work among communities of people who do not have regular involvement with the church, sometimes in specialised ministries. There can be particular value in such deacons being able to respond to requests for baptism which arise out of this work. Such services of baptism can then become occasions for expansive proclamation of the word in which the love of God manifested through their ministry of service may be shown in an appropriate liturgical context. It is recommended that as good practice the ministry of baptism by deacons arises out of and relates to the mission work in which they are particularly engaged. It will always be appropriate to be in dialogue and collaboration with the presbyter in pastoral charge regarding the arrangements for such services and the continuing oversight of those who have been baptised.

63 *Extending Communion*, 1984.

64 *Faith and Order Committee report*, 2008, section B4

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2.4.12. Similar considerations apply when deacons preside at weddings and funerals. Such occasions are also opportunities for expansive proclamation of the word and are most appropriate when they arise out of the communities with which the deacon is particularly engaged. Decisions about the most appropriate minister to preside at weddings and especially funerals should be made in consultation between the staff of the Circuit.

3. The Theology Underpinning the Religious Order

3.1 The Methodist Diaconal Order

3.1.1. The Methodist Church reaffirms that the MDO “is a gift of God to the Church to help enable the Church to fulfil its calling; and God has brought many blessings through the ministry of Methodist deacons and deaconesses across the years.”⁶⁵ The nature and place of the MDO within the Methodist Church has evolved over time as the Church has sought to discern the will of God and remain faithful to its calling. Today, it is very different from the Order⁶⁶ that was formed in 1935 as the result of a merger of the Wesleyan Deaconess Order, the Free Methodist Order, and those appointed as Sisters in the Primitive Methodist Church. The MDO is open to women and men, its members belong to the order of deacon in the Church of God and are in Full Connexion with the Conference, and they serve in a wide variety of contexts and appointments as the Conference directs.

3.1.2. Membership of the Order is life-long, and follows a process of discernment of a call to the religious order as well as to the order of ministry. As the Methodist Church reaffirms that all members of the MDO are required to be ordained to the diaconate, it is clear that membership of the religious order is bound up with membership of the order of ministry. This is described in Standing Order 728:

“Every person received into Full Connexion as a deacon becomes thereby also a full member of the Methodist Diaconal Order. Membership of the Order continues whilst the deacon remains in Full Connexion, and resignation from either Full Connexion or the Order automatically entails resignation from the other.”⁶⁷

65 *What is a Deacon?* 2004, 4.2; *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 1.2

66 The Wesley Deaconess Order

67 SO 728

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- 3.1.3. Currently there is some confusion about the point at which deacons are admitted to the MDO and the means through which this happens. A religious order would usually admit its own members, but “every person received into Full Connexion as a deacon becomes thereby also a member of the Methodist Diaconal Order.” In addition, currently at their ordination, deacons (having already received a Bible as a sign of their ordained ministry) are presented with the badge of the MDO by a representative of the Order who says:

“Receive this badge
as a sign of the membership of the Order
to which you have been admitted by your ordination.”⁶⁸

These words and the words of SO 728 (paragraph 3.1.2 above) seem to place the point of admission to the MDO in different places. Whilst deacons are required to be ordained to the diaconate, ordination is not a means of admission to the MDO and the Methodist Church reaffirms that admission to the MDO takes place as deacons are received into Full Connexion. The symbolic giving and receiving of the badge of the Order properly belongs at this point and it is therefore recommended that admission to the MDO occurs during the Conference after reception into Full Connexion, that an appropriate liturgical text is produced for this event and that the order for the *Ordination of Deacons* is amended accordingly.

- 3.1.4. The MDO is a dispersed community, and its members support each other through prayer, fellowship, and mutual care. Its members are committed to a *Rule of Life* (see Appendix 1 and 3.3.2 below)⁶⁹, approved by the Conference, “so as to provide a framework for the devotional life of each member, for discipline, mutual care and accountability, and for individual and collective commitment to the ministry of a deacon.”⁷⁰ Members of the MDO are also required to attend and to remain through the sessions of the annual Convocation, “to recall and reflect upon their diaconal vocation, to watch over one another in love and to consider the work of God.”⁷¹ During the Convocation deacons rededicate themselves to diaconal ministry and renew the promises made at ordination. Alongside this, all deacons participate in the life of Area Groups wherever possible and attend meetings. Area Groups are places where

68 *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.323

69 CPD, 2018, Volume 2, Book IV, Part 5, pp.755-756

70 SO 750(3)

71 SO 753(1)

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deacons exercise mutual care and accountability and confer about their life together, they enable reflection and discernment on diaconal vocation, and they are a source of fellowship, prayer, learning and mutual support.

- 3.1.5. As both the Church and the Order have sought to respond to God's call to participate in the servant ministry of Christ amidst the changing needs of the Church and the world, various questions have arisen about the nature and identity of the MDO. It is acknowledged that, since the early 1990s, the focus on questions relating to the order of ministry meant that there was less clarity about what is meant by the MDO as a religious order.⁷² Questions that the then President of the Conference, Brian Beck, put to the 1993 Convocation remain pertinent:

- (1) Is the MDO a religious order or only a supportive fellowship?
- (2) What makes you different?
- (3) What are the bonds, common discipline, that hold you together and make you more than a supportive fellowship?
- (4) Do you have a mission statement which will hold you together?⁷³

3.2. The nature of the MDO

- 3.2.1. The MDO stands in a long line of Christian communities, a heritage which is very diverse. It is described as a religious order,⁷⁴ although it is hard to define exactly what is meant by the term 'religious order' as it can mean different things to different people in different times and places. The MDO itself is diverse, not least because its members have been admitted into the Order at different stages of its development. This, together with the lack of clarity about what is meant by the MDO as a religious order, means "that the concept of the MDO being a religious order is open to many interpretations which may well conflict."⁷⁵

- 3.2.2. At different times both the MDO and the Methodist Church have given this question consideration, and it is possible to identify various factors which influence the nature and self-understanding of the MDO today:

72 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 5.1 and 5.2

73 Beck, B, 1993, in Lovell, G, December, 1993. *The MDO as a Religious Order: Some Issues for Consideration* (A Discussion Paper for Regional Groups), p.1

74 SO 750

75 Lovell, G, December 1993. *The MDO as a Religious Order: Some Issues for Consideration* (A Discussion Paper for Regional Groups), p.1

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- a. The MDO understands itself as having its roots in the 19th century development of deaconess orders within a wider revival of interest in both the religious life and in diaconal ministry. Such orders were focused on service and mission, particularly in areas of poverty and social deprivation.
- b. Also of particular significance is the medieval women's movement of the Beguines. These were primarily women who devoted themselves to prayer and good works in towns where they attended to the poor. They did not take formal religious vows but lived according to a simple rule.
- c. In the early 1990s the MDO worked with the Revd Dr George Lovell and, through a complex consultation process, produced a mission statement (see Appendix 2) based on its own experience and vision.⁷⁶ The *Mission Statement* was approved by the 1997 Convocation, but was rarely referred to during recent consultations and some deacons were unaware of its existence.⁷⁷
- d. A strapline, widely used on material produced by the MDO for several years, described it as "A mission focused, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God's world." Many members of the MDO continue to refer to this, although it was never more widely discussed within the Methodist Church, nor formally approved within the Order.
- e. The MDO is part of the Methodist Church, and therefore shaped by its theology, spirituality, ecclesiology and ways of being. The relationship between the MDO and the Methodist Church is described further in section 4 below.
- f. As the 2016 report noted, the MDO's "ethos and self-understanding are also held in the collective memories of its members and expressed

76 The consultancy process through which Lovell worked with the Order is written up in: Lovell, G, 2000, *Consultancy, Ministry and Mission*. Burns and Oates, pp.155-180

77 Note that the work of Michael Hill (Hill, M, 1973. *The Religious Order: A Study of Virtuoso Religion and its legitimation in the nineteenth-century Church of England*. London: Heinemann) has also been influential. From a sociological analysis of religious orders he describes an 'ideal type' of religious order and this has been used in the training materials of the MDO and is part of the underlying thinking in the *What is a Deacon?* report. Although the MDO has moved on from this model, it continues to be a factor in the MDO's self-understanding.

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through their lives of prayer and service.”⁷⁸ The diverse experiences of members of the MDO, both of the MDO as a religious order and of the different kinds of ministry in which they have been engaged, lead to a variety of perceptions of the religious order within the MDO itself. These are enabled to co-exist as deacons commonly prioritise engaging in witness, service (particularly in areas of need) and prayer, and to living out their commitment to the Order through caring, supporting and praying for each other.

3.3. The MDO as a religious order

3.3.1. Is, then, the MDO a religious order or only a supportive fellowship (see 3.1.5 above)? The MDO is certainly different from some other religious orders: it comprises ordained deacons, it is part of the Methodist Church and governed by its discipline, it is a dispersed community, and its members are deployed by the Church and provided with a manse and stipend. Yet, religious orders are contextual and have looked very different in different places and in different periods of history. The MDO has a number of characteristics which identify it as a religious order.

3.3.2. Religious orders have a **rule of life**. To be a member of a religious order is to accept the discipline that goes along with membership. Sometimes members of a religious order take formal vows, others make their commitment to a community and way of life in different ways. Members of the MDO commit to a *Rule of Life*⁷⁹ which has been approved by the Conference. The purpose of the Rule is to deepen fellowship and bind deacons together “that [they] may continue to become the people God wants [them] to be, both individually and as an Order.”⁸⁰ It is intended to enable a rhythm of life and therefore there “is no element of compulsion in it” and every member of the Order “is encouraged to adapt the Rule to their own needs and experiences.”⁸¹ As a result it has relatively little within it about personal accountability and oversight within the MDO. In the light of this and the following reflections on the apostolate of the MDO (see section 3.4 below), it is recommended that the Convocation review the MDO’s *Rule of Life* and propose any appropriate changes.

3.3.3. Members of a religious order commit to a **life in community**. Often members of religious orders live in community together in one place. Today the MDO

78 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 5.3.6

79 The Rule of Life can be found in Book IV, Part 5 of CPD. It was approved by the 1998 Conference.

80 *Rule of Life, CPD*, Volume 2, Book IV, Part 5, p.755

81 *Rule of Life, CPD*, Volume 2, Book IV, Part 5, p.755

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is a dispersed community and its members have different patterns of family and personal life, but they all make a lifelong commitment to the MDO community and live by its *Rule of Life*. Members of the MDO “have a sense of identity and belonging, a mutual responsibility, a shared life of prayer, a common calling and a lifelong commitment, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.”⁸² Attendance at Convocation and participation in Area Groups are also key aspects of community life. Community is crucial to the life and witness of the MDO, and deacons are also involved in a wide range of communities as part of their participation in the ministry of the Church. Consultations with the MDO highlighted how many deacons understood the religious order to offer a model for community and ways of relating as disciples of Jesus. It offers a vision and invitation to members of Local Churches and the wider communities, to live out community in their particular situation (see further paragraphs 4.5-4.7 below).

- 3.3.4. Religious orders have a **sense of vocation**, and there is both a personal and a corporate calling. Members of a religious order usually have a sense of call to the specific religious order, which is a matter of discernment for both the individual and the religious community. Those exploring a sense of call to the MDO have to demonstrate a call to both the religious order and to ordained diaconal ministry. The Methodist Church therefore plays a significant part in the discernment process. Religious orders also have a sense of corporate calling, the sense that God is calling that particular group to ongoing service. The MDO’s common calling to the servant ministry of Christ and to a life of prayer are reflected in the *Rule of Life*.
- 3.3.5. Religious orders have an **apostolate**. Most religious orders since the middle ages have had an idea of the distinctive ministry and mission to which they are called, and the spiritual gifts that help them fulfil it. Many religious orders, including the MDO, combine the apostolate of formal prayer and a life focused on the ministry of service in different degrees. This is explored further in section 3.4 below.
- 3.3.6. The Methodist Church therefore reaffirms that the MDO is a religious order. It has a number of defining characteristics of a religious order, and has always been considered as such in both its own, and the Methodist Church’s, understanding. Focused around witness, service and a life of prayer, it is a religious order within the Methodist Church and a vital part of its life.

82 *Rule of Life*, 1998, Preface, CPD, 2018, p.755

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3.4. The apostolate of the MDO: witness and service, and a life of prayer

- 3.4.1. Religious orders often have a guiding image, or symbol, of what they are there for. The bowl and towel, a symbol of witness and service, continues to be associated with the MDO, and it evokes the footwashing of John 13. The passage and the symbol of the bowl and towel were frequently referred to in consultations with the MDO.
- 3.4.2. There was consistency in how deacons understood the bowl and towel to represent a ministry of service which involved acts of loving kindness, particularly in respect of those who are poor, marginalised and in need; and, through such actions and attitudes, how deacons pointed people to Jesus and helped them to understand the nature of God's all-embracing, transforming love. Yet it was acknowledged that the symbolism could also be problematic, not least because of how it might be understood to perpetuate a narrative which equated diaconal ministry only with acts of mercy and loving kindness (as discussed in 2.2 above), and because of its association with unhealthy notions of servanthood. It is therefore important to find ways of emphasising the broader reference of these symbols to the transforming servant ministry of Christ which makes visible the love of God, reveals the presence of the kingdom and instigates a way of being of mutual love and service. Through being alert to how the symbols may be misused, and by making more explicit their broader meaning, the MDO can reclaim the bowl and towel as a guiding symbol for its life and work today.
- 3.4.3. Furthermore, John 13 and its associated imagery is not just a mandate for activity but demonstrates that loving service flows from a relationship with God through Christ. It is God who acts first, through Jesus. The disciples first had their feet washed by Jesus before being instructed to serve each other in the same way. Recalling the footwashing through the symbol of the bowl and towel points to the outpouring of God's love and the priority of relationship with God through Christ. Witness and service are rooted in this relationship. The role of prayer in the life of the MDO is therefore vital.
- 3.4.4. The apostolate of the MDO therefore has two elements, a life of witness and service, and a life of prayer. These are echoed in the key themes that can be drawn from the consultations with members of the MDO, namely a concern for social justice and meeting need, and a commitment to a life of prayer as part of the MDO community which, more widely, offers a model of discipleship.
- 3.4.5. A commitment to service in communities of need has been part the Order since its beginnings. Whilst the form of service may have changed across

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the years, its purpose has not. A care for those experiencing impoverishment in some form, a concern for social justice, and a desire to make known the transforming love of God, have been constant features of the Order. Today deacons are involved in a wide variety of forms of witness and service. Members of the MDO go where needed and serve the needs of the Church as part of the Methodist Church's corporate response to share in God's mission.

- 3.4.6. As members of the religious order all deacons are committed a life of prayer. Commitment to the *Rule of Life* includes commitments to pray, to pray for other members of the MDO, and to pray for the life of the Church. Whilst prayer is a vital part of the discipleship of all Christians it is an obligation for members of the Order. For all deacons, commitment to the *Rule of Life* is a commitment to a pattern of corporate prayer. They also have to be prepared to give an account of how they keep this commitment. The spiritual discipline of deacons is therefore both individual and corporate. Individual spiritual discipline is important not just for the individual (many deacons spoke about how it enabled them to serve in sometimes difficult places) but also it is valuable in itself and as part of the prayer life of the whole of the Methodist Church.
 - 3.4.7. If, therefore, the bowl and towel is the guiding symbol, and witness and service and a life of prayer the apostolate of the MDO, the MDO is encouraged to continue reflecting on how this is embodied in its community life and in the ministry of deacons.
- 3.5. The Methodist Church reaffirms that the MDO is a religious order within the Methodist Church, with an apostolate of witness and service and of prayer, symbolised by the bowl and towel. It is clear from the consultations that further reflection is required on how the mutual accountability within the MDO is enacted, and that more vigilance is required around the tension of dual relationship with the Church (as members of an order of ministry and as members of a religious order). There is also an opportunity for further considering the role of the MDO in enabling the ministry of the Methodist Church through witness and service and prayer in the context of the early 21st century. It therefore seems appropriate to look again at the *Rule of Life*, the *Mission Statement*, and the discipline with regards to participation in Area Groups, and to see whether these, together with Standing Orders, could more clearly express the nature and identity of the MDO today. Some reflection in these areas is ongoing, and it is further recommended that the Convocation reviews the *Mission Statement* of the MDO in the light of this report and proposes appropriate changes to the Conference. It is, therefore, also timely for further attention to be paid to the process and criteria for discerning and testing a call to the religious order and for equipping deacons for membership of the MDO.

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- 3.6. The Conclusion to the 2016 report further noted that “there are opportunities for creative exploration as the Methodist Church in Britain continues to determine what kind of Methodist religious order might best serve the Church in the present age.”⁸³ The consultations revealed an interest in exploring the possibility of establishing one or two small intentional communities of deacons in areas of need as one possible expression of the MDO today. The question was raised as to whether deacons were truly sent where needed or whether they were, to a certain extent, sent to Circuits which had the resources to pay for them. Although the MDO is dispersed, community living together in one place is a feature of religious orders. In re-affirming the MDO as a religious order and in noting the importance of community in the diaconal ministry of the Methodist Church, the MDO and the Methodist Church are challenged to explore whether the time is right for there to be a small, intentional community of deacons, living and working together in one place to focus the charisms of the MDO through their witness and service in a particular community.

4. The Ecclesiology Underpinning the MDO

- 4.1. The MDO is a religious order in the Methodist Church comprising deacons ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God. It is part of the Methodist Church, regulated by Standing Orders and constituted as a body of the Church, and it has a particular relationship with the Conference. The Conference admits its members and directs where they serve. It appoints the Warden, approves the MDO’s *Rule of Life*, and appoints the time and place for the meeting of the Convocation.⁸⁴ The Convocation “may adopt and submit resolutions to be moved in the Conference on any matter of connexional interest.”⁸⁵
- 4.2. The MDO exists as part of the Methodist Church’s response of love and praise of God for the sake of the world and it helps enable the Methodist Church to share in God’s mission in the following ways.
- 4.3. First, **the MDO is a response to, and responds to, need.** Its story is one of meeting particular needs on behalf of the Methodist Church (usually in areas of poverty and deprivation), and of responding to the needs of the world and the Methodist Church. Members of the MDO are willing to be sent where needed. Being sent is a hallmark of religious orders, and it makes visible the commitment that Methodists make in the Covenant prayer. The readiness to respond to need and share God’s love is a vital element of the witness and service of the Methodist Church.

83 *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate – Interim Report*, 2016, 6.4

84 SO 750-752

85 SO 753(4)

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- 4.4. Second, **the MDO is a community of prayer**. From its beginnings, Methodism has put an emphasis on personal holiness. The Methodist Church is called to be a holy people in which each member has a call to personal holiness as part of a community of Christians. The MDO bears witness to and embodies that, making it visible in a particular way through its own life and discipline. The *Rule of Life* emphasises a commitment to personal holiness through prayer, self-examination, accountability and good stewardship. The MDO therefore offers a model of prayer and spiritual discipline, and reminds Methodists that personal holiness is an ecclesial emphasis. Participation in the MDO's pattern of prayer can also be the resource from which all deacons support others to discern their own 'rule of life'. Members of the MDO also uphold the Methodist Church in prayer, regularly praying for its life and work.
- 4.5. Third, **the MDO models discipleship as a part of belonging to a community**, potentially prompting wider reflection on what it means to journey with one another, to be a praying people, and to live for God and neighbour. Such a consideration of community focuses on the notion of *koinonia* (communion, participation, fellowship, sharing) which has become central in ecumenical dialogues to understanding the life and nature of the Church. The Church is called, brought into being by God, and sent to "witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom."⁸⁶ *Koinonia* involves the recognition of the complementarity of human beings, a willingness to respect, learn from and seek to understand the other, a mutual sharing of material and spiritual resources, a common acceptance of each other's identity, and the outpouring of self-giving love.⁸⁷ The Methodist Church has affirmed that:

"The divine gift of *koinonia* is both a gift and a calling. The dynamic activity of God drawing us into communion also entails the calling of Christians and Christian communities to manifest *koinonia* as a sign and foretaste of God's intention for humankind."⁸⁸

- 4.6. Building and being in community has been a significant part of the story of the MDO, as well as being more widely regarded as characteristic of the ministry of deacons. There has been much reflection on *koinonia* as the transformed life of loving mutual service rooted in *diakonia*,⁸⁹ including within the DIAKONIA World Federation:

"Diaconal community is centred in the whole community of Christ. The diaconate

86 World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, 13

87 *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 3.1.7

88 *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 3.1.7 referring to the WCC Commission on Faith and Order statement, *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, pp.8-9

89 See, for example, *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, pp.7-8

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has a great deal to share with the church about community. Some members of the diaconate live in motherhouses, others live in families or small households, and still others live alone. But all see community as part of their diaconal identity. Ideally in community people share what they have, receive what they need, and find support and encouragement for service in the world. Community is both gift and task, blessing and burden, a place of joy and a place of struggle and suffering. Community may make possible a corporate witness that is more powerful than the voices of individuals.”⁹⁰

- 4.7. With its more focused rule of life and obligation to mutual accountability, the MDO embodies the connexional principle of mutuality and interdependence out of which others are also encouraged to reflect on how they embody those principles. It has been acknowledged, however, that the MDO has sometimes been better at offering mutual encouragement than upholding mutual accountability, and the MDO is working to redress this imbalance, not least through exploring how the Area Groups can be a place for deepening discipleship.
- 4.8. Fourth, the MDO **resources deacons for ministry**. Within the consultations many deacons stated that the MDO resourced and enabled them to undertake diaconal ministry in the contexts in which they were stationed. The MDO therefore better resources and supports deacons, enabling them to serve where the Church determines they are needed.

5. Areas for further exploration

- 5.1. The distinctive position of deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain gives rise to a variety of questions which require further exploration, and the Faith and Order Committee (unless otherwise indicated) will bring a further report on the following to the 2020 Conference.

5.1.1. The Role of the Warden

In the light of the theological and ecclesiological reflection on the nature of the MDO and its place within the Methodist Church, it will be necessary to re-examine the Role of the Warden to see whether it is consistent with this understanding. The most recent work by the Methodist Council on the Warden’s role in 2013 gave rise to the work on the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate, and it was acknowledged that any comment on the role of the Warden should be made following the completion of that work. It should be noted that, in recent years, the Warden’s role in various

90 DIAKONIA World Federation, *Theology Paper*, 1998, p.2

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processes in the life of the Church has been re-examined, but there is a need to ensure that there is a theological and ecclesiology consistency and coherence. Further reflection would include comment on their role in the oversight and discipline processes of the Church, the candidating and probation processes, in the act of reception into Full Connexion and admission to the MDO, and in the diaconal ordination service.

- 5.1.2. In its response to Memorial 1, the 2011 Conference directed that the Methodist Council, Convocation, and the Faith and Order Committee were to review and report on the question of whether it is consonant with our understanding for the office of Vice-President to be open to deacons as well as lay people. This question has not been explored during this piece of work and will now be given consideration in the light of this report.
- 5.1.3. The implications of the conclusion that it continue to be a requirement that those ordained as deacons are also members of the religious order need some further exploration, for example how this might impact (or not) on aspects of ecumenical relationships and how it impacts on deacons from other churches and connexions serving in the Methodist Church in Britain.
- 5.1.4. The conclusion that all deacons should be equipped to preach and be able to be responsible for an act of worship on the plan requires some further reflection on how this might impact on requirements for candidating, initial ministerial training and probation, and on what this means in terms of any additional resourcing offered to current deacons. It would be most appropriate for this work to be undertaken by the Ministries Committee.
- 5.1.5. There also needs to be some further consideration of the following:
 - a. Questions of oversight and how the discipline of the religious order relates to the discipline of being in Full Connexion with the Conference;
 - b. The process of reception into Full Connexion and the ordination service for deacons, and the role of the Warden and of the Secretary of the Conference in both;
 - c. A review of the category of 'Associate Member' of the religious order;
 - d. Some further reflection on diaconal dress;
 - e. Whether any amendments to Standing Orders are required in the light of this report and the further work.

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- 5.2. The results of the further reflection on the areas outlined in this section will be reported to the 2020 Conference.

***RESOLUTIONS

25/1. The Conference adopts the Report.

25/2. The Conference reaffirms that the Methodist Diaconal Order is a religious order open only to those who are deacons in Full Connexion with the Methodist Conference; and that all deacons in the Methodist Church are also required to be members of the Methodist Diaconal Order.

25/3. The Conference directs that *The Methodist Worship Book* is amended in the following ways:

- a. The words “usually called Ministers” are deleted from paragraph two of the Introduction to the ordination services, and from the title of The Ordination of Presbyters;
- b. The Gospel passage at (8) in The Ordination of Deacons is extended to John 13:1-20;
- c. The presentation of the badge of the Methodist Diaconal Order at (19) in The Ordination of Deacons is deleted; and
- d. Paragraph three of the Introduction to the Ordination Services is amended as follows:

More recently, *the Methodist Church has recognised that it has received the diaconal order of ministry. Further*, the Methodist Diaconal Order has developed from the Wesley Deaconess Order into an **religious** order of ministry for both women and men. Deacons are ordained to a ministry of **witness and** service and pastoral care and seek to equip God’s people for **witness and** service in the world. In the Methodist Church, diaconal ministry is an office in its own right rather than a step toward the office of presbyter. For both presbyters and deacons, ordination is to a permanent lifelong office of ministry.

25/4. The Conference directs that from the 2020 Conference the presentation of the badge of the Methodist Diaconal Order occurs immediately after the reception into Full Connexion of those who are to be ordained to the diaconate, and it directs the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Secretary of the Conference, to create an appropriate liturgical text for this symbolic action.

25/5. The Conference affirms that preaching is part of the ministry of deacons and

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directs that from 1 September 2020:

- a. deacons shall no longer be listed as Local Preachers on the Plan;
- b. that the list of ministers on the Plan will follow the order listed in SO 785(4)(b);
- c. that all deacons will be members of the Local Preachers' Meeting.

- 25/6. The Conference directs the Ministries Committee to explore what changes may be needed to the candidating, training and probation processes to equip and authorise deacons to preach and report to the 2020 Conference bringing further recommendations as needed.
- 25/7. The Conference directs the Law and Polity Committee to bring recommendations for any necessary amendments to Standing Orders in respect of the decision set out in resolution 25/5 and the consideration referred to in resolution 25/6 to the 2020 Conference.
- 25/8. The Conference directs the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Ministries Committee to explore what changes may be needed to the candidating, training and probation processes to enable the discernment, testing and equipping for membership of the religious order and report to the 2020 Conference bringing further recommendations as required.
- 25/9. The Conference affirms that it is not appropriate for deacons to have an authorisation to preside at Holy Communion.
- 25/10. The Conference directs the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order to review the *Rule of Life* and the Mission Statement of the Methodist Diaconal Order and bring recommendations for any changes to the 2021 Conference.

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Appendix 1

Rule of Life of the Methodist Diaconal Order

The Conference of 1998, in accordance with what is now SO 750(3), approved the following Rule of Life for the Methodist Diaconal Order.

Preface

As a religious Order, we recognise the unconditional love of God as known in Jesus Christ. Out of this springs our calling to the sacrificial servant ministry of Christ and to be a dispersed community living by a rule of life. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we seek to be:

- careful stewards of God's gifts,
- faithful in all relationships,
- and willing servants.

The Order provides the means for: fellowship and encouragement, pastoral care and mutual support, prayer and discipline, and opportunities to explore, celebrate and share in God's purpose and plan. As members of the Order, although diverse, we have a sense of identity and belonging, a mutual responsibility, a shared life of prayer, a common calling and a lifelong commitment, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Rule of Life

We follow this Rule of Life to deepen our fellowship and bind us together as a dispersed community, that we may continue to become the people God wants us to be, both individually and as an Order. This Rule does not bind us in a way that stifles and disables, but is a means by which we might be liberated to find a sense of wholeness in the rhythm of life. There is no element of compulsion in it, but the hope that freely followed and adapted to personal needs and circumstances, it will become a framework for the enrichment of our own life, the life of the Order and the people of God amongst whom we live. Every member of the Order is encouraged to adapt the Rule to their own needs and experiences. May it be to us a blessing and joy, and bring glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Devotional Life

We endeavour to:

- attend worship regularly, especially Holy Communion,
- set aside time each day to read the Bible devotionally and to pray, including a time of intercession for members of the Order,

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- regularly set aside time for self-examination – a chance to look back and see where we have failed in loving God and our neighbours, and to give thanks for blessings received,
- find a spiritual director/companion, who will accompany, help and affirm us,
- make time each year for a Retreat or Quiet Day.

Discipline

We endeavour to:

- be sensitive to the needs of those close to us, our families, dependants and friends,
- be aware of and relate to, the community in which we live,
- acknowledge and enjoy God's gifts to us of time, talents, money and possessions and through God's grace to be able stewards of these,
- order the rhythm of each day, month and year, to allow for study and relaxation, weekly day off, regular holiday,
- attend Convocation (unless a dispensation is granted),
- participate in the life of area groups wherever possible and attend meetings,
- keep in contact with other members of the Order by the giving or receiving of fellowship and support, by visits, letter or telephone.

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Appendix 2

MISSION STATEMENT⁹¹

Diaconal ministry is a way of life which expresses the servant ministry of Christ by the whole people of God to the world.

DEACONS

Are men and women called by God to serve in many different ways, offering lifetime commitment, and a willingness to serve where needed.

- Their call is tested by the Church, which ordains them to the Office and work of a deacon in the Church of God.
- They share with the church in its ministry
- They work with people in church and community. They exercise caring, pastoral, evangelistic and outreach ministries. Some are Local Preachers; all are able to be involved in the leading of worship.
- They seek to hold in balance in their ministry; worship, prayer, service and personal relationships.
- They seek to develop a lifestyle and spirituality in keeping with the calling to a servant ministry.

THE METHODIST DIACONAL ORDER

- Is a religious order whose members are ordained to the diaconate as an order of ministry.
- Is a body under the authority and discipline of the Methodist Conference, whose members are selected, trained and appointed to exercise diaconal ministry in partnership with presbyters and laity.
- Is a practical, prophetic and educational expression of this form of ministry which encourages and enables them in their ministry.
- Is a dispersed community living by a rule of life, with a sense of mutual accountability. · Provides fellowship and encouragement, pastoral care and mutual support, prayer and discipline and opportunities for sharing Gods vision.
- Is a sign and a means of diaconal ministry to the church and community.

'Through God's grace our objective is to share in the Church's task of witness, mission and service.'

91. Approved by the Methodist Diaconal Order Convocation 1997, printed here with one amendment to ensure clarity – from *What is a Deacon?* 2004, Appendix