

RECOGNITION OF ORDER OF LOCAL PREACHERS (1996)

MEMORIAL M55 (1995): RECOGNITION OF ORDER OF LOCAL PREACHERS

- 1 The following Memorial (M55) was presented to the 1995 Conference:

The Thornley (13/10) Circuit Meeting (Present 36. Vote: Unan) request that the order of Local Preachers be recognised as an order of Ministry on the following grounds:

 1. Local Preachers are part of an order.
 2. The Order is committed to providing a particular form of ministry viz – The ministry of the word.
 3. Local Preachers make a lifelong commitment.
 4. Local Preachers are under discipline.
 5. While they do not go for stationing, they do go when and where they are sent within their circuits and the availability of other ministers for stationing is now limited i.e. Ministers in local appointments.
- 2 The Conference referred the Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Division of Ministries and the Law and Polity Committee for study and report to the Conference of 1996. The Committee has consulted as directed, and reports as follows.
- 3 The Faith and Order Committee notes that the Memorial from the Thornley Circuit consists of a request supported by five arguments. The first argument is that Local Preachers already belong to an order. The term 'order', applied to local preachers, does not appear in any current official documents (for example, the Deed of Union, Standing Orders, *The Methodist Service Book*), though it was used in the 1936 recognition service. It seems unlikely that in 1936 there was any clear sense of a lay 'order of ministry' or, for that matter, that local preachers were a sort of 'religious order'. It is not clear, therefore, what particular significance the use of the word had in 1936 or what the Thornley Circuit's statement 'Local Preachers are part of an order' means.
- 4 It could, of course, be argued that Local Preachers are in fact members of an order, despite the failure of our documents to say so explicitly, and that this order ought to be recognised as an order of ministry.
- 5 The term 'order of ministry' has not been commonly used in Methodism: it has entered our vocabulary largely as a result of the protracted deliberations on the

nature of the ordained diaconal ministry. It is the case that, in some branches of the Church, it was possible to be admitted to a 'minor' order without being ordained by prayer and the laying on of hands. Methodist writing on the subject of ministry has, however, avoided any suggestion of 'graded ministries'; the presbyteral and diaconal orders of ministry are described as being parallel and distinctive, with neither being superior to the other. In our documents, the ministry of the whole people of God is stressed, with ordained (presbyteral and diaconal) ministry seen in its context. So any talk of 'minor orders' would not be appropriate.

- 6 At the same time, the term 'order of ministry' has been employed in our documents only in connection with those ordained as presbyters or as deacons and deaconesses. It would be a major departure from our usage to employ the term in respect of people who were not ordained.
- 7 The Thornley Circuit argues that 'The Order is committed to providing a particular form of ministry viz - The ministry of the word'. It is true that Local Preachers are committed in this way. But Class Leaders and Pastoral Visitors are also committed to specific forms of ministry. So are Lay Workers, Church Stewards, Workers with Children and Young People and many others. Unless the Church were to countenance the introduction of an almost infinite variety of 'orders of ministry', the Thornley Circuit's second argument could not be regarded as a ground for so recognizing Local Preachers. In any case, in our various reports and statements about the presbyteral and diaconal orders of ministry, the emphasis has been upon focus and representation rather than function.
- 8 The Thornley Circuit's third argument, that Local Preachers make a lifelong commitment, is generally speaking true in practice (though the official Recognition and Commissioning Service does not actually mention lifelong commitment). It is also true that lifelong commitment is a criterion suggested in the 1993 report on the Diaconate as one of a number of distinctive features of both presbyteral and diaconal ministry, but it is only one such feature. This is not an argument that can stand alone.
- 9 The fourth argument, that Local Preachers are under discipline, is not a valid argument for recognizing them as members of an order of ministry. Every Methodist member is subject to discipline.
- 10 Finally, the Thornley Circuit raises the question of stationing. Here there is some confusion between stationing and itinerancy. All Ministers, deacons and deaconesses are in fact stationed. The names of those in local appointments, those in other appointments and supernumeraries appear on the stations. The contrast being made by the Thornley Circuit meeting is actually between people who are itinerant and those who are not. Being itinerant is not a significant factor in the context of an order of ministry; being stationed is.
- 11 It will be apparent that the Faith and Order Committee believes that the grounds proposed in the Memorial are not strong enough to support the request that Local Preachers be recognised as belonging to an order of ministry. The Committee further believes that there are other issues to be considered, which

further support the view that the Conference should resist the Thornley Circuit's request.

- 12 First, to regard Local Preachers as an order of ministry would be to introduce an unacceptable division into lay ministry. It has already been pointed out that other lay people commit themselves to specific ministries (pastoral visitors, etc) but the argument should not rest there. There is such a thing as a theology of the laity, but not of particular tasks within the laity. What is needed is strong affirmation of the theology of lay ministry, as well as an equally strong affirmation of the theology of ordained ministry.
- 13 Second, to talk of Local Preachers as being members of an order of ministry might run the risk of 'clericalising the laity'. One of the most valuable features of the ministry exercised by Local Preachers lies precisely in the fact that they are lay people. They live and work within the 'secular' world. They are not, for the most part, theological specialists, but they are able to relate the Gospel to the everyday world in a way that a minister often cannot. It is important that the 'layness' of their work is not obscured; rather, if anything, it should be emphasised.
- 14 Local Preachers play a vital and greatly cherished rôle in the life of Methodism, a rôle which frequently goes far beyond the conduct of Sunday worship. Individually and corporately, they are held in high regard throughout the Connexion. The Faith and Order Committee does not believe that to regard them as members of an order of ministry would do anything further to enhance the work of Local Preachers; on the contrary, it might obscure the 'layness' of that work and prove divisive. Furthermore, the balance of the theological arguments weighs heavily against adopting such a policy.

RESOLUTIONS

- 1 The Conference adopts the report.
- 2 The Conference resolves that the report be the Conference's further reply to Memorial M55 (1995).

(Agenda 1996, pp.212-215)