

## **THE METHODIST DIACONAL ORDER (1995)**

### **Introduction**

1. In 1993 the Conference adopted the report on the Methodist Diaconal Order, which had been prepared by the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Division of Ministries, the Methodist Diaconal Order, and the Law and Polity Committee. The report was substantial – over 11,000 words – and cannot easily be summarized, though a brief indication of its contents will be given in the following paragraphs and a number of quotations from it appear in the present report.
2. The 1993 report was occasioned by resolutions of the Conferences of 1988 and 1989. The fundamental issue was the adoption in 1988 of the resolution:

The Conference resolves that the members of the Methodist Diaconal Order who are received into full membership of the Order shall be ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God . . .

because the words ‘ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God’ suggest that deacons and deaconesses belong to an ‘order of ministry’ – the diaconate – whereas the Deed of Union appears to recognize explicitly only one order of ministry, the presbyteral; from a constitutional point of view deacons and deaconesses are regarded as lay people. The report therefore addressed the theological question as to whether or not the diaconate should be regarded as an order of ministry and the constitutional question as to whether the Deed of Union required amendment in consequence.

3. The table of contents of the 1993 report gives some indication of the thoroughness with which these issues were addressed:

Introduction  
The New Testament and ‘Deacons’  
The Diaconate in the Early Church  
The Diaconate in the Medieval West  
The Reformation and the Diaconate  
The Diaconate in Protestantism to the Nineteenth Century  
The Diaconate in British Methodism to 1978  
The Methodist Diaconal Order  
Ecumenical Perspectives  
Theological Perspectives  
Constitutional Issues  
Recommendations

4. After extensive examination of the history of the diaconate, of current ecumenical perspectives and of the theology of diaconal ministry, the report reached the following conclusion:

There is reason to believe that the Methodist Diaconal Order is both an order of ministry and a religious order, in which the servant ministry of Christ to the world is focused and represented, and indeed that this is not a

new phenomenon. It was true of the Wesley Deaconess Order, though not always recognized or explicitly stated. The existence in Methodism of that which is both an order of ministry and a religious order should be acknowledged and welcomed as a significant contribution not only to Methodist life but also to the developing ecumenical understanding of diaconal ministry.

5. These recommendations followed:

The Faith and Order Committee and the other bodies involved in the preparation of this report recommend that the Conference should, by adopting resolution A1, express its concurrence with the main thesis of this report, namely that the Methodist Church recognizes and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal.

Second, it is recommended that Clause 4 of the Deed of Union be amended so that it does not appear to suggest that all Methodists must be either laypersons or ministers (of the word and sacraments) and thereby to appear to exclude diaconal ministry.

Third, it is recommended that the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Division of Ministries, the Methodist Diaconal Order, and the Law and Polity Committee, be directed to consider what further constitutional changes to the Deed of Union and Standing Orders will be needed if resolution 2 is confirmed by the Conference of 1995, and to recommend amendments to the Deed of Union and to Standing Orders to the Conferences of 1995 and 1996 respectively.

6. The 1993 Conference adopted these resolutions:

A1 The Conference adopts the Report.

A2 The Conference amends Clause 4 of the Deed of Union as follows:

- (i) in the second substantive paragraph delete 'both ministers and laymen';
- (ii) in the seventh paragraph for 'men' substitute 'persons';
- (iii) in the eighth paragraph for 'The preachers itinerant and lay' substitute 'All Methodist preachers'.

A3 The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Division of Ministries, the Methodist Diaconal Order, and the Law and Polity Committee, to bring proposals for further changes to the Deed of Union and to Standing Orders to the Conferences of 1995 and 1996 respectively.

### **The Deferred Special Resolution**

7. The adoption of Resolution A2 set in motion the long and complex process by which proposed amendments to the Doctrinal Standards Clause of the Deed of Union must be referred to District Synods, Circuit Meetings and Church Councils. The final decision on the 'Deferred Special Resolution' will be taken by the Conference of 1995. If the amendments it proposes are confirmed, they will not, in themselves, cause the Deed of Union explicitly to recognize the Methodist Diaconal Order as an order of ministry; but the

amended Doctrinal Clause will no longer preclude that recognition. As Resolution A3 indicated, further amendments to the Deed of Union and to Standing Orders will be required.

### **An Order of Ministry**

8. There is some evidence to suggest that, in discussions of the Deferred Special Resolution, the term 'order of ministry', as used in the 1993 report, has caused confusion and uncertainty. Though the report speaks of two parallel, complementary and distinctive orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal, some people have argued that Methodism has no orders of ministry at all and that the Deed of Union precludes such orders. The Faith and Order Committee believes this argument to be mistaken.
9. Clause 4 of the Deed of Union states that:

The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of men.

In the judgement of the Faith and Order Committee, the intention of this sentence is to refute the idea of an **exclusive priesthood** which belongs to one order or class, rather than to deny the **existence** of any orders or classes.

10. It is important that there should be no misunderstanding of what Methodism means by the 'priesthood of all believers' or of the place of ordained persons within it. As the Faith and Order Committee's report, *Called to Love and Praise*, which can be found in Volume 1 of the 1995 Conference Agenda, says:

The early Christian communities had no separated and distinctive priesthood. Christ alone was High Priest, the mediator between God and humankind (Hebrews 9:1-2). The whole Church was 'priestly', continuing the ministry of Israel and her Messiah (1 Peter 2:9), but no one was ever called a priest in the sense of offering a cultic sacrifice. The old cultic language was transferred to the community and to daily life: a local church could be called 'the temple of God' (1 Corinthians 3:16), and the self-offering of Christians to God was their 'sacrifice' (Romans 12:1-2). . . . It will be seen that the New Testament directs us to the priesthood of the body of believers, rather than the priesthood of every believer. This latter emphasis is not necessarily wrong, but it is much more individual-centred than the language of Scripture, which stresses the inter-dependence of believers.

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

the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' is that we share, as believers, in the priesthood of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself . . . Into that priesthood of Christ we are taken up by faith, and we in our turn, and in self-identification with Him, offer ourselves in utter humility and obedience as a living sacrifice to God. We are 'priests unto God', and therefore 'take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience', as we are enjoined in the Covenant Service. So the doctrine does not mean that every Christian has the right to exercise every function and administer both

sacraments. For it is not an assertion of claims, but a declaration of our total obedience. A Methodist Minister is a priest, in company with all Christ's faithful people; but not all priests are Ministers. (*Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, p.130)

11. The 1960 Statement thus recognizes that within the ministry of all God's people, God calls some men and women to specific ministries. Though all Christ's faithful people are priests, 'not all priests are Ministers'. There is a body of people known as 'Ministers' and, in the Methodist Church, their call has been tested, they have been admitted into full connexion with the Conference, and they have been ordained to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments.
12. It is in this sense that it is proper to talk about 'orders of ministry'. An order of ministry is that to which those ordained by prayer and the laying on of hands for a specified ministry (for example, that of the Word and Sacraments) belong. To suggest that Methodism recognizes no orders of ministry is quite wrong: for example, the Ordination Service (of ministers of the Word and Sacraments) authorized by the Conference of 1974 includes these words, spoken by the President (or the President's deputy):

. . . these are the persons whom we intend, in God's name, to ordain to the Ministry of his Church in the Order of Presbyters. (*Methodist Service Book*, p. G7)
13. It is therefore beyond dispute that Methodism has at least one order of ministry – the order of presbyters, ministers of the Word and Sacraments. The main thesis of the 1993 report on the Methodist Diaconal Order was that, in fact, the Methodist Church has **two** orders of ministry – the presbyteral and the diaconal. The two are separate and distinct, though complementary. Each is rooted in the ministry of Christ himself and each exists within the total ministry of the whole Church.

### Outstanding Issues

14. The following paragraphs are quoted from the 1993 report:

If it is accepted that the Methodist Diaconal Order is both a religious order and an order of ministry and that therefore Methodism has in fact two orders of ministry rather than one, there are constitutional consequences. To agree that it is not appropriate to regard deaconesses and deacons as lay people, or to imply that there is only one form of ordained ministry, the presbyteral, means that what is said about ministry in the Doctrinal Clause, Clause 4 of the Deed of Union, needs attention. (11.1)

It is therefore proposed that three words be deleted from Clause 4 and that two substitutions be made. If this proposal finds favour, three difficulties with the Clause will have been resolved with minimal change to an historic text. (11.6)

In 11.3 it was said that references to 'ministers' and 'ministry' in the doctrinal standards should be understood to be references to presbyters and the presbyterate. This, of course, is not intended to deny the ministry to which deaconesses and deacons are ordained or the ministry of the whole

Church. It recognizes, however, that the word 'minister' is the one which springs most readily to Methodist lips to describe a presbyter. If the recommended changes to the Doctrinal Clause find favour, it will be desirable to modify the definition of 'minister' in Clause 1 (xix) of the Deed of Union (probably at the Conference of 1995) to read as follows:

'minister' when used in relation to the Methodist Church means a person ordained to the ministry of the word and sacraments and admitted by the Conference into full connexion, or a person recognised and regarded as such under the provision contained in this Deed. (11.7)

We turn now to the need for further constitutional changes. It is sometimes assumed that, once it is recognized that deacons and deaconesses belong to an order of ministry and are not, therefore, lay people but diaconal ministers, it will be right for them to be aligned with the presbyteral ministers for most if not all purposes. This does not necessarily follow. Each separate issue must be considered carefully. (11.8)

For instance, is it the case that deacons and deaconesses should be members of the Ministerial Sessions of the Synods and the Conference? Much care must be exercised in discovering the attitude of the deaconesses and deacons themselves to such a development; but there is at least a case for regarding the Ministerial sessions as Presbyteral sessions (in some ways akin to the diaconal Convocation), where presbyteral ministers consult together about matters of common concern and discipline. On this basis, deacons and deaconesses would not need to attend such meetings. (11.9)

The Representative Session of the Conference, however, is another matter. At present, members of the Methodist Diaconal Order who attend it do so as lay representatives. It would clearly be extraordinary and unjust to insist that the only members of the Conference should be presbyteral ministers and lay people, or, to put it the other way round, to make deacons and deaconesses the only body of people excluded from membership of the Conference. One possible way of dealing with this matter could be to set aside a certain number of Conference places for members of the Diaconal Order, presumably either by reducing the number of ministerial (presbyteral) representatives, or by reducing in equal numbers ministerial and lay representation. The latter would abandon the principle that the Conference consists in equal number of ministers (presbyters) and lay people. The former might be preferred inasmuch as it would preserve something of this principle by making the Conference consist of equal numbers of ministers (diaconal and presbyteral) and lay people. There could well be other and better ways of dealing with this matter. It needs to be settled eventually, as do other issues, such as the Presidency and the Vice-Presidency of the Conference, but it is mentioned now, without a recommended solution, as an indication of the sort of issue that needs to be addressed if the principal contention of this report is accepted. (11.10)

15. The working party appointed by the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Division of Ministries, the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Law and Polity Committee, has now identified several places in the Deed of Union and Standing Orders where changes will in due course be required if

the Deferred Special Resolution is confirmed. The working party presented a report to the Faith and Order Committee in March 1995, but the Committee found it impossible to come to a mind on some of the issues raised and is not therefore in a position to make firm recommendations to the Conference for further amendments to the Deed of Union.

16. Indeed, the Committee has come to believe that most of the matters on which the Committee itself is divided raise issues which need to be addressed by the Methodist Council. The reason for this is that the matters concerned are almost all associated with the Conference itself (see paragraphs 18 and 24 below) and other working parties have reported or are to report to the Council on related matters. Indeed the issues raise profound question about our polity which require discussion throughout the Church. The Committee therefore recommends that the Conference should direct the Methodist Council to bring further reports to the Conference. The Committee believes, however, that the Conference should know what issues remain to be resolved and suggests that the following matters will be prominent among those which require attention.

#### **Definitions**

17. It is desirable that clause 1 (xix) of the Deed of Union be amended so as to provide the definition of 'minister' suggested in the 1993 report and that a new clause 1 (xiA), defining 'deacon or deaconess', be introduced. Clause 1 (xxviii), defining 'probationer' will also need amendment.

#### **The Ministerial and Representative Sessions of the Synods and the Conference**

18. As paragraph 11.9 of the 1993 report noted, it is necessary to decide whether the Ministerial Sessions of the Synods and the Conference should remain 'presbyteral' sessions, of which deacons and deaconesses are not members, or whether deacons and deaconesses should be members of one or both of these Sessions. The joint working party was of the opinion that the Ministerial Sessions of the Synods and of the Conference should remain 'presbyteral'. Most, though not all members of the Faith and Order Committee agreed that the Ministerial Session of the Conference should remain 'presbyteral' and that the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order should be seen as a broadly equivalent assembly for deacons and deaconesses. The Faith and Order Committee was not persuaded that there was a strong case for keeping Ministerial Synods exclusively presbyteral, or that there must be consistency in this respect between the Synods and the Conference.
19. With regard to the Representative Session of the Synods, the Methodist Diaconal Order believes it to be desirable that in due course Standing Orders be amended in order that attendance at these Sessions should be a matter of obligation and discipline for deaconesses and deacons as it is for presbyters. If deaconesses and deacons were to become members of the Ministerial Synods (see 18 above), the matter of discipline would also apply in that regard.
20. As the 1993 report indicated, the issue of diaconal membership of the Representative Session of the Conference is extremely difficult to resolve. The working party proposed to the Faith and Order Committee that deacons and deaconesses who attend the Representative Session should do so as 'ordained' rather than 'lay' representatives. In other words, the Conference

should consist of a specified number of lay members and an equal number of people, prescribed by Standing Orders, of ministers, deacons and deaconesses. Synods would be free to appoint to their allocated 'ordained' seats whatever combination of deacons, deaconesses and presbyters they wish. Clause 14 (1) and (6) of the Deed of Union would require amendment if this were to happen.

21. A similar principle might obtain in respect of Conference Elected Representatives (Clause 14 (5)) and representatives of Connexional bodies (Standing Order 102).
22. Clause 24 (i), which deals with the reconvening of the Ministerial Session, would then need minor amendment.
23. Clause 14 (4)(a) deals with representation from other autonomous Conferences. This issue is currently being considered by other connexional committees.

#### **The Vice Presidency**

24. The future nature and role of the Senior Officers of the Conference is under consideration by the Methodist Council. The Faith and Order Committee found it impossible to come to a mind about the way in which members of the diaconate might hold such office. One possibility, preferred by the working party, would be for the office of Vice President of the Conference to be open to deaconesses and deacons as well as to lay people. In that case, Clause 27 of the Deed of Union would require amendment so as to read 'lay member, deaconess or deacon' instead of simply 'lay member'. If, however, the Vice Presidency is judged to be a lay office (as distinct from a non-presbyteral office), this would be inappropriate. Another possibility would be a redefined Presidency to be open to presbyters or deacons (or lay people?). Another course would be the creation of a new senior office, alongside the Presidency (held by a presbyter) and the Vice Presidency (a lay office), which would be for deacons or deaconess only. A fourth possibility would be to retain a presbyteral Presidency and lay Vice Presidency and to make deacons and deaconesses ineligible for either office. Though this possibility has to be mentioned, the working party and the majority of the Faith and Order Committee regard it as unjust that any body of people within the Church should be excluded from holding one of the Senior Offices of the Conference.

#### **Candidature, Stationing and Membership**

25. It has been suggested by some correspondents that issues of candidature, stationing and membership also need to be addressed. Such matters are under review within the Division of Ministries and within the Methodist Diaconal Order itself, and it will be appropriate for the Methodist Council to confer with those bodies in due course.

#### **The Working Party**

26. The Faith and Order Committee expressed its gratitude to the members of the joint working party which has addressed these issues since 1989 and which was largely responsible for the writing of the 1993 report and the identification of the issues which underlie the present report. The members of the working

party were Sister Diane Clutterbuck, Dr Susan Hardman Moore (to 1994), Mrs Susan Howdle, the Revd John Job, Sister Jane Middleton (from 1993), the Revd Dr John Taylor, the Revd Brian Tebbutt, Sister Christine Walters and the Revd Neil Dixon (convener).

### **Recommendations**

27. The Faith and Order Committee believes that the main thesis of the 1993 report, namely that the Methodist Church recognizes and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal, is of crucial importance as consideration continues to be given to constitutional amendments related to the ministry of deacons and deaconesses. Provided that the Deferred Special Resolution is confirmed, the Committee recommends that the Conference, by adopting resolution J2 below, re-affirms the judgement of the 1993 Conference in this matter.
28. The Faith and Order Committee believes that the 1993 report and the present report provide a basis for study and discussion throughout the Connexion. It recommends that the Conference should encourage such study and discussion and should direct the Methodist Council to take whatever action may be appropriate to facilitate the process.
29. The Faith and Order Committee recommends that the ongoing responsibility for proposing amendments to the Deed of Union and to Standing Orders in respect of the Methodist Diaconal Order should pass from the Committee to the Methodist Council.

### **RESOLUTIONS**

The Conference adopts the report.

The Conference confirms the judgement of the 1993 Conference that the Methodist Church recognizes and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal.

The Conference encourages Districts, Circuits and Local Churches, carefully to consider the 1993 and 1995 reports on 'The Methodist Diaconal Order' and directs the Methodist Council to take whatever action may be appropriate to facilitate the process.

The Conference directs the Methodist Council to bring further reports, including proposals for amendments to the Deed of Union and to Standing Orders, to the Conferences of 1996 and 1997.

*(Agenda 1995, pp.713-721)*

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Before adopting the above resolutions, the Conference had previously confirmed the amendments to Clause 4 of the Deed of Union (see paragraphs 6 and 7 above).