

THE STATUS OF DEACONESSES AND THE ADMISSION OF WOMEN TO THE MINISTRY (1961)

INTRODUCTION

The Committee was instructed by the Conference of 1959 to examine and report on 'The Place and Work of the Wesley Deaconess Order in Methodism and the Admission of Women to the Ministry.' These subjects are clearly related to one another and are part of the greater question 'How can the Methodist Church make best use of the devoted service that women can offer to their Lord?' This is of particular importance to the Church in a day when she is hard pressed to reach the hearts and minds of men and women with the Gospel.

In our report we first examine the Ministry exercised by women in the New Testament and the subsequent history of the Church. Part 2 deals with the work of our Deaconesses. Part 3 discusses the Admission of Women to the Methodist Ministry

PART 1. THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

A. In the New Testament

Jesus Christ restored woman to that status of equality with man before God which was part of God's original intention for her as the Old Testament describes it. We read there that she was created with man in the image of God to be his helper and partner and to share with him the rule over the creation (Genesis I 26-28, II 18-23). Sin, both in man and in woman, degraded her from her high position, until even among the Jews she was regarded and treated not as a person but as a thing, the property first of her father and then of her husband, and occupied a wholly subordinate place in the whole life of the community.

But Jesus spoke to women in the same way as He spoke to men (John IV 7-27), and offered them forgiveness of sins and His friendship and help just as He did to men (Luke VII 36-50, X 38-42). There is an ease and freedom of personal relationship among the men and women of Jesus' company which make a striking contrast to the prevailing conditions of Jewish life at the time. Some of the women who had been healed by Jesus accompanied Him and His disciples on some of their journeys (Luke VIII 2), and some, again, were among the witnesses of the Resurrection.

There were, however, no women among the Twelve Apostles, nor, as far as we know, among the Seventy who were sent out two by two into the towns and villages which Jesus was going to visit (Luke X 1). Yet no theological conclusion about the status of women can be drawn from this fact, since it would have been virtually impossible, in the social conditions of the time, for women to have been included in either of these groups.

The restored status of women was recognized in the Apostolic Church. It is taken for granted in many passages in the Acts and the Epistles that they have a full and responsible part in the worship and communal life of the Church. Several of them are mentioned as the leaders of churches which met in their houses (Acts XVI, 13, I Cor. I, 11). Others, again, are said to have 'laboured in the Gospel' (Romans XVI 12,

Phil. IV 2, 3). Prisca seems to have taken a leading part in instructing Apollos in the fullness of the faith (Acts XVIII 26).

When we consider the position of women in the society which surrounded the early Church, the most striking fact of all is that women fulfilled regular ministries with definite functions. The four unmarried daughters of Philip, the evangelist, were prophetesses (Acts XXI 9); and St Paul regarded it as a thing to be expected that women should prophesy in the Church at Corinth (I Cor. XI. 5). Phoebe was a 'deaconess' of the Church at Cenchreae (Romans XVI 1); and the author of I Timothy III 11, either St Paul or a disciple of St Paul writing after the time of the Apostle, is held by some to refer to women as included in the order of 'deacons'. We cannot be quite certain as to the functions of these 'deacons' and 'deaconesses', but they were associated with the 'presbyters' or 'bishops', as they were also called, in the churches of St Paul's foundation (Phil. I 1), and probably assisted them in the distribution of alms to the needy.

In I Timothy V 3-16, we hear of an order of 'widows', who were to be women of mature age and to engage in the ministry of intercession.

There are, however, two passages in the New Testament which do not seem to tally with the picture presented by the New Testament as a whole. The first is 1 Cor. XIV 33b-35: 'As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church' (RSV). Some of the oldest MSS place these words in a different position in the text, after verse 40.

In the same letter St Paul has already assumed that women prophesy and pray in public worship, discussed whether they should do so with their heads unveiled, and ruled that they should not. Here he apparently forbids women to speak altogether in the course of worship.

Some scholars have sought to solve the difficulty by saying that the variation in the MSS shows a whole passage to be a later interpolation; but this is too easy a solution. Nor can we easily suppose that St Paul has changed his mind since he wrote the earlier passage, and has now decided that the best way to deal with the disorder of women who prophesied, and with the disorder that might result from their doing so, is to forbid them to prophesy altogether. The most probable interpretation is that certain women in the Church of Corinth were in the habit of interrupting the prophets while they were speaking, to ask about, or to express views about, the meaning of what they were saying, and that this was causing disorder in worship. St Paul forbids women, therefore, to speak while the service is in progress, and orders them to enquire about the meaning of what they have heard when they arrive home. On this view there is nothing in this passage inharmonious with the Apostle's earlier injunctions.

The other passage is I Timothy II 12: 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent' (RSV). If the author of the Epistle is St Paul, we are bound to conclude that his views had changed in his later years. If, as is more likely, the author is a disciple of St Paul writing after the Apostle's death, then we have evidence that the first post-apostolic age wished to curtail the freedom of expression that Christian women, in their new-found liberation from social bondage, were claiming.

It is further to be noticed that, so far as we know, there were no women among the presbyter-bishops whom St Paul appointed in many churches. We are not, it is true,

definitely informed in the New Testament that this was the case, but it seems clear that if there had been any women presbyter-bishops, the fact would have emerged at some point. It is generally, and probably rightly, supposed that the presbyter-bishops not only superintended the life of the churches, but also celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on all occasions when no Apostle or visiting prophet was present. The non-inclusion of women among the presbyter-bishops indicates, therefore, that women did not take part in the superintendence of the churches or in the celebration of the Lord's Supper in New Testament times.

Doubt has been cast upon this conclusion by those who interpret the word usually translated 'older women' in I Timothy V 2 as 'female presbyters' and who suppose that there was such an order in the early Church, or that women were admitted to the ranks of the presbyter-bishops. But such an interpretation does not fit the context, least of all in an Epistle which elsewhere so definitely forbids women to exercise any authority over men or to be teachers (II 12).

We have next to ask what beliefs are presupposed by the position which the early Church assigned to women. Three are discernible. The first is clearly stated by St Paul in Galatians III 28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (RSV). That is to say, the difference of sex between men and women is transcended (not, of course, abolished) in the Christian Church, in the sphere in which Christ is Lord; man and woman are reconciled in the unity which is the gift of Christ.

The second belief is that the 'charismata' of the Holy Spirit, the free gifts of grace by which alone anyone can fulfil the ministry of prophecy, or healing, or any ministry at all within the Church (I Cor. XI, 4-11), are given to women as well as to men; for otherwise no woman could rightly prophesy. But when we enunciate this principle we do well to remember that we are not expressly told in Scripture that women are the recipients of *all* the 'charismata' of the Spirit.

The third belief is the subjection of women to men. This has an Old Testament basis in one form of the doctrine of creation (Genesis II, 21, 22; III 16). It is explicitly stated more than once in the New Testament (for instance, in I Cor. XI 3. Ephes. V 22-24, I Timothy II 13, 14), and is implied in many other passages.

It is probably on the basis of this third belief that women were excluded from the order of presbyter-bishops and from the administration of the Lord's Supper. It is sometimes suggested that this exclusion was due to the differences of natural and social function between the sexes, but there is no hint of this as a reason in the New Testament. It is held by others that the reason was that, since it is a priest who administers the Lord's Supper, and a priest represents Christ Himself, and only a man can represent Christ, women are incapable of administering the Sacrament. But the notion of the minister who administers the Lord's Supper as a priest representing Christ is wholly alien to the New Testament, which never refers to an individual as a priest at all. The doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' means that we are all taken up by faith into the priesthood of Christ, and are identified with Him in His complete self-offering as we offer ourselves completely to God. But this applies to men and women alike, and certainly there is nothing to debar a woman from the priesthood of all believers. We are left with the view that it was the belief in the subjection of women – to be seen as a fact at every level of ancient life, ecclesiastical and secular – that prevented women from exercising the office of presbyter-bishop in the New Testament.

The ministers of the Church today correspond to the New Testament presbyter-bishops. The Church in the twentieth century must therefore ask itself this question: do we hold the practice and doctrine of the Apostolic Church, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit to be for ever definitive in the matter of admitting women to the ordained ministry; or do we hold that in this matter it did not fully see the implications of the teaching and practice of Jesus Christ, and took over instead its convictions and practices from the universal beliefs of the society in the midst of which it was living?

The answer seems to be that while the authority of the New Testament is final for the Church in all ages, it is an authority which concerns the great matters of the faith rather than one which covers the detailed applications of the faith to the conditions of any particular age, since these conditions necessarily differ so widely. Here the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit to respond to every situation as it arises. Of the three beliefs which governed the attitude of the New Testament writers to the position of women in the Church the first two are concerned with 'the great matters of the faith', and remain for ever valid. The third belief has no such abiding validity, since it is so closely bound up with the conditions of the age in which it was held. We are no longer required, in other words, to regard women as subject to men, and cannot exclude women from the ordained ministry on the ground of such subjection.

B. In the history of the Church

The history of the ministry of women after the New Testament times is hard to disentangle, but it is safe to say that no question of ordaining them as presbyters ever arose until long after the Reformation. Moreover, as the emphasis on the priesthood of the Christian ministry grew it became less and less likely that women would be considered in relation to it, for this growth was accompanied by the development of the notion that the priest represents Christ. Nor should we forget that in the popular mind, and in the minds of Christians also, priestesses were associated with religions which the Church wished most strongly to repudiate.

This does not, of course, mean that there were no ministries which women could exercise. In particular there was the order of deaconesses, which, as we have seen, went back to the New Testament. There is a probable allusion to this order in the letter of Pliny to Trajan about the Christian Church in Bithynia (112 AD), but nothing is said about it as an existing institution by Christian writers until the beginning of the fourth century. The way in which Clement of Alexandria and Origen refer to the New Testament deaconesses seems to imply that the order had lapsed in their time (late second and early third centuries). Fourth century writers speak, however, as if the order were well established in their own time, and we may take it that it was revived in the course of the third century. From this time until the eleventh century the evidence for its continued existence is fairly clear. It began its new life in the Eastern churches. It spread from the East to Gaul, and later to Rome. By the eleventh century, however, it was beginning to die out again, and had ceased entirely in the later Middle Ages, both in the East and in the West. In the West, at least, the function which deaconesses had performed were largely taken over by abbesses and nuns.

During the period in which the order of deaconesses flourished, they were ordained by bishops with the laying on of hands. Their functions included: (a) acting as intermediary between the bishop and women who wished to consult him; (b) assisting at the baptism of women (but not actually baptizing them); (c) taking and administering the consecrated elements of bread and wine to the sick; (d) teaching the faith to women and children; (e) keeping the doors by which women entered the

church. Many writers and some Councils during the period point out carefully what women, presumably including deaconesses, are not allowed to do – for instance, to baptize, or preach, to pray or sing aloud in church, to approach the altar, or to bless, the implication sometimes being that they had presumed to do what they were not allowed to do. There was some variation in practice of the age at which women could be admitted to the order, but it was in no case lower than forty. Deaconesses were always either virgins or widows.

When in the West the monastic orders proved more attractive to women than the order of deaconesses, the abbesses of nunneries received far greater powers than any woman had previously held in the Church. Within their own nunneries they conducted all the services of the Church except the Eucharist. They held virtually supreme control over the lives of the nuns under their authority, and, in the case of double monasteries such as those which were common in England in Saxon times, over those of the male inmates as well. The principle of the subjection of women certainly did not operate in their case.

The Reformation was in part a revolt against the monastic life of both women and men, and also to some extent against the illicit influence of women behind the scenes in high ecclesiastical places. The whole position of women in the Church had, therefore, to be re-thought by Protestants. The first and most widespread result of this re-thinking was a very great emphasis on the place of family life, and therefore on the spiritual influence of mothers on their children. This emphasis tended to obscure the part which unmarried women, at least, can play in the life of the Church outside their own homes, and it was not until the nineteenth century that the order of Deaconesses was established in any Church of the Reformation. The first such order was begun by Pastor Flidner in Kaiserswerth on the Rhine, and the idea has spread among many of the Protestant Churches of the Continent, including the Methodist Churches, mainly with the purpose of caring for the sick and the aged. In 1862 the first Anglican Deaconess was ordained as such by the Bishop of London and Anglican Deaconesses, having received theological and pastoral training, may, with episcopal permission, read Morning and Evening Prayer, preach at non-liturgical services, and administer the chalice at Holy Communion (a right not often exercised, and shared with men Lay Readers).

C. In the Churches today

In the present century the proposal to admit women to the ordained Ministry has been made in almost every Church other than the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Church of England, the other Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Church of Scotland have taken no steps in the direction of admitting them, though the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland voted in 1960 for the admission of women to the ordained lay eldership. (This is not yet ratified).

Several of the Lutheran Churches, including those of Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway and (since 1960) Sweden, admit women to the full ordained ministry. In all the Lutheran Churches of Germany there is an order of 'Vikarinnen'. They are trained in the same way as men ordinands, and in some Churches they are 'ordained', in others 'consecrated'. They have different functions in the different Churches. In some their functions closely resemble those of ordained Ministers, to the point of including the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion in women's hospitals, and in some they may receive a licence to administer it in the parishes, as frequently happened during and just after the Second World War.

There are Vikarinnen also in the 'United' (ie. Lutheran and Reformed in union) Churches in Germany. Here they are normally 'ordained', and have full rights to administer the Sacraments and fulfil the whole of the Ministerial Office.

The Congregational Churches, the Disciples of Christ, the Baptist Churches of Great Britain, and the Northern Baptist Churches of the United States admit women to the ordained Ministry on equal terms with men. The Presbyterian Church of England, having asserted some years ago that 'there is no barrier in principle to the admission of women to the Ministry,' now has one ordained woman minister, working in a congregation. Two Churches in which the Methodist Church is united with other Churches, the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ in Japan, accept women in the same way as men. In the Methodist Church of the United States women were admitted as 'supply pastors' and 'ordained local preachers' more than thirty years ago, but without a vote at Conference, guaranteed appointments or retirement benefits: in 1956 they were admitted to 'full clergy rights' and are now on equal terms with men. This ruling also covers those European Methodist Churches which are under the jurisdiction of the Methodist Church of America. The Methodist Church of New Zealand has ordained three women to the Ministry.

PART 2. THE WESLEY DEACONESS ORDER

A. The History of the Order

i. Before Methodist Union

Each of the former branches of Methodism made use of the services of Deaconesses.

The Wesleyan Order was founded by Dr T. B. Stephenson in 1890 with three guiding principles: there must be vocation but no vow: there must be discipline without servility: there must be association without excluding freedom. He envisaged it as 'a soul-converting agency . . . the strong arm of the Church'. After Dr Stephenson was appointed to the Ilkley Circuit all the training was concentrated there, the present college being purchased in 1902. The one-year course was extended to two years in 1928. When the order was recognised as a Department of the Church in 1907 there were 175 Deaconesses, including 14 overseas and 19 in college.

The Free Methodist Church had an Order organised on lines similar to the Wesleyan Order, founded in 1891 by the Rev T. J. Cope with its headquarters at Bowron House, Wandsworth Common.

There was no organised Order in the Primitive Methodist Church; the Rev J. Flannigan, founder of St Georges Hall in the Old Kent Road, began to train Sisters, and later most appointments came under the general care of the Home Mission Department.

ii Since Methodist Union

The three Orders merged in 1935, when 25 came from the P. M. Church, 57 from the U. M. and 290 from the W. M. Ilkley became the training centre and administrative headquarters.

The new Book of Offices in 1936 included a service for 'The Ordination of Deaconesses'. 'Ordination' replaced 'Consecration' as previously observed in the

Wesleyan Order, and thus followed the wording used in the Church of England and the United Methodist Church.

In 1942 Conference adopted various resolutions concerning the Wesley Deaconess Order, among them: 'Ordained Deaconesses are not to be regarded, any more than Ministers, as employees. The only right relationship is an honourable colleagueship, in which no gifts of leadership and insight need be denied their exercise, and a Deaconess will have scope and freedom to do the work for which she has been trained and ordained'. Various regulations were adopted, among them: candidates must intend life service: ordinands are to be personally presented at Conference and be admitted into full membership of the Order by a resolution of Conference: continuity of service should be assured, stations be printed in the Minutes, and Ordained Deaconesses in the Active Work be members of the Representative Session of Synod.

In 1943 Conference said 'In view of the increasing recognition of women's work in all civic, professional and industrial spheres, the Conference is deeply concerned lest the Church should show itself timid and unadventurous in entrusting women with responsibility and opportunities of leadership'.

In 1947 the Convocation of the Order approved (200 for, 5 against, 4 neutral) the resolution of the Conference committee that women be admitted to the Ministry, with the same status as men, save that marriage should normally involve resignation. By a similar majority, the Convocation disapproved of the alternative suggestion of the Conference committee that there should be a parallel Ministry of the Word and Sacraments designed only for women.

B. The Work and Status of the Order Today

When the Deaconess Order began in Methodism, there was no National Health Insurance, there were no benefits for old age or unemployment, and there was widespread poverty. These factors conditioned the work of the early Deaconesses, all of whom were given some medical training, and went to appointments where social work was sorely needed. With the passage of time and the coming of the Welfare State with full employment, much of this philanthropic work has been rendered unnecessary. From the first, however, spiritual ministrations were the dominant motive and content of the work. This is still true, although the pattern has changed. In spite of increased prosperity the problems of loneliness, family dissension and moral failure remain unsolved, and the pastoral ministry of the Deaconesses is still as urgently needed as ever.

In addition there has been an increasing demand for Deaconesses to preach and all candidates in recent years have become Local Preachers. Many new opportunities for service have arisen: some of the changes are reflected in these comparative figures:

	1939	1961
City Missions	145	100
New Areas	6	31
Rural Areas	3	25
All others	<u>76</u>	<u>82</u>
Total Home Appointments	<u>230</u>	<u>238</u>

At present about 60 have 'pastoral charge of societies', and 38 have a dispensation to give the Sacrament. Others serve in Industry, Moral Welfare, and Youth Work: the Caravan campaigns have continued since 1934, and Chaplain's Assistants have been

serving since 1940 when the first woman appointed to a Chaplaincy in the Armed Forces was a Wesley Deaconess.

These changes have come about, not through formal resolutions or policy decisions, but from the developing needs of the Church and the recognition of the ability and devotion of our Deaconesses. Financial consideration and man-power shortage have also played their part in bringing about the present situation in which the Church is increasingly using Deaconesses to fill what would otherwise be ministerial appointments in the Circuits.

The Church as a whole should therefore be concerned to ensure that the members of the Order be given their proper status in the life and organisation of the Church. We believe that the Deaconesses themselves are concerned about status, not from any desire for self-aggrandisement, but from a desire to do their work more efficiently and to serve God more adequately. We are fully aware that status depends less upon Conference resolutions than upon the good will and collegueship of ministers, and the respect of the Church, won by their integrity, devotion and ability. It is a question not so much of the status of an office, as of the recognition by the whole Church of the quality and nature of the work of a Deaconess. It is in this context that the following observations are made:

1. *Relationship to the Ministerial Staff.* The changes in the type of Deaconess appointment already referred to have added to the confusion that exists in the minds of many people about the status of a Deaconess and her position in the life and organisation of her Circuit. The Conference of 1942 declared that she should share 'honourable collegueship' with the ministers: in many Circuits she is fully recognised as a member of the ministerial staff, but there are others where her name appears only in the list of Local Preachers or Class Leaders. 'Honourable collegueship' should mean that a Deaconess is a member of the Circuit Staff meeting, taking her full share in the discussion of Circuit policy, and is responsible, like the Ministers, directly to the Superintendent (rather than to an official in a local church) for the work she undertakes. On the Circuit Plan her name should appear following the list of ministers.
2. *The method of invitation and appointment.* This has a direct bearing on the status of a Deaconess: at present an appointment can be begun or ended simply by the vote of the Quarterly Meeting with no reference to a higher court. With ministerial appointments any increase or reduction of Circuit Staffing has to have the sanction of Synod and Conference, and adequate reasons for the change have to be put forward. Another committee has been appointed to report on this: we only record our belief that this somewhat casual method of opening and closing Deaconess appointments diminishes their status, and lessens their security. The stationing of Deaconesses is in the hands of the Warden: this puts a very heavy responsibility on one man, but he has an unrivalled knowledge of the members of the Order, and any committee appointed to station Deaconesses would have to lean very heavily on his advice.
3. *The payment of Deaconesses.* Another committee has been appointed to report on this and we make no detailed recommendations about it. It is our judgement that the present scale is too low. Circuits should not be encouraged in the belief that cheap ministerial labour is available by securing a Deaconess. There is also ground for concern at the poor living accommodation that is sometimes provided.

4. *Their sphere of service.* It was the hope of the Conference of 1942 that in the work given to Deaconesses 'no gifts of leadership and insight need to be denied their exercise, and that a Deaconess will have scope and freedom to do the work for which she has been trained and ordained'. Many have found such scope in the appointments to New Areas or Country Circuits where they have had pastoral charge of one or more churches; such opportunities for preaching and leadership have brought a sense both of satisfaction and of the fulfilment of their call to serve. Others have found ample scope in the work of our Central Missions, where pastoral visitation and the leading of classes have provided opportunities for evangelism as well as for ministering to Church members. At the same time opportunities are increasing for specialised work in industry or moral welfare or amongst young people. The call to such work may come from a Department of our Church or from an outside agency, but the Church should be satisfied that such appointments provide scope for evangelism and pastoral care before permitting Deaconesses to undertake them. The Order was established primarily for the winning of souls for Christ and this should remain its paramount purpose. We judge that, normally, it can best be fulfilled if Deaconesses are given every opportunity to work alongside Ministers in the Circuits, Missions and Departments of Methodism.
5. *The right to administer the Sacrament.* Thirty-eight Deaconesses are at present authorised to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper: these are stationed in appointments where they have pastoral charge of one or more Churches. Those in such appointments welcome this authorization, and there are some who think that all Deaconesses should be given it. The committee does not recommend this, for it would be tantamount to ordaining Deaconesses to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and so forming a parallel ministry to that of the men. However unsatisfactory the present position may be, no radical change should be made until the Church has reached a decision about admitting women to the Ministry. Meanwhile there should be continuity of policy about the dispensations that are granted: as long as the conditions of the appointment remain the same a dispensation given to one should be given to her successor.
6. *Training.* At present Deaconesses have a two-year course of training at Ilkley: lectures are given on the Bible, Systematic Theology, Church History, Worship and Preaching, Psychology and Teaching Method. Voice-production and Music are taught by visiting teachers. On one afternoon and evening each week every student serves as a Deaconess in a Mission or Church in the neighbourhood, and in the summer vacation at the end of her first year she does a month's work under an experienced Deaconess.

With the greater responsibilities laid upon some Deaconesses, an additional year of training would be beneficial. For some this might be devoted to further study of the Christian faith, while others might receive specialised training in Moral Welfare, Youth Work, etc., at another training centre or college. We welcome the fact that the General Committee of the Wesley Deaconess Order is already considering such a year of specialised training. In commending this we have in mind that Conference has already accepted the policy of a fourth year for students in our Theological Colleges, and that the Government has recently extended the period of training for teachers from two years to three. If a Deaconess is to give of her best to the Church she must be given sufficient training to enable her to develop her gifts.

PART 3. THE ADMISSION OF WOMEN TO THE MINISTRY

A. Women Ministers in Methodism.

'The New History of Methodism' says of John Wesley 'No other man of his century did so much to encourage the ministry of woman in the service of Christ and people', but it was with some reluctance that he accepted them as preachers. Convinced at length that 'God owns women in the conversion of sinners' he added 'And who am I that I should withstand God?' Mary Bosanquet, afterwards the wife of Fletcher, was the leader of a distinguished group of women who preached. Sarah Crosby, one of her assistants, travelled nearly a thousand miles in one year with Leeds as her centre. Miss Mallett held Wesley's authority from the Conference of 1787 'as a preacher in our connexion, so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrine and attends to our discipline'. There were others, but the Conference of 1803 pronounced preaching by women to be 'both unnecessary and generally undesired'. Nevertheless there were numerous women preachers until a further expression of disapproval by the Conference of 1835 led to a rapid decline in their numbers.

In the early days of Primitive Methodism, women itinerants were widely used, being appointed in the same way as the men. No fewer than nine were accepted in the year 1834, but as the supply of men increased fewer women were accepted. Experience showed that few continued to serve long, although the last of them, Elizabeth Bultitude, had travelled for thirty years before her retirement in 1862.

The only branch of the United Methodist Church that had Women Ministers was the Bible Christian Church. From their earliest days women were numbered among their itinerants and there were 27 in 1825. Few continued long in the ministry: the men were advised to marry them, and many did. The leakage, however, was mainly due to their not being able to stand the strain, and there are frequent records of women becoming supernumeraries for a year. For thirty years after 1861 none were accepted, but after 1890 a few were received and at the time of the 1907 Union there was still one in England and a number on the Mission Field.

B. Consideration of the subject since Union.

When preparations were being made for Methodist Union a joint committee was appointed to discuss the Admission of Women to the Ministry. In its report to the first full Conference of the united Church in 1933 it said 'We cannot find that there is any function of the ordained Ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex'. The report went on to recommend the unification of the Deaconess Order and the Women Missionaries, and proposed that women be admitted to the Ministry on the same terms as men. Ten synods rejected the scheme: the Women Missionaries and the Deaconess order did not wish to be amalgamated, and the 1934 Conference rejected the whole scheme.

A new committee, appointed in 1937, recommended that women be accepted for the Ministry provided a department of the Church would accept responsibility for their employment. The 1938 Conference approved in principle and sent it back to the committee for further details to be worked out. After the 1939 Conference had reaffirmed the principle further progress was prevented by the war, but in 1945 Conference passed a resolution which began 'The Conference declares its readiness to receive, for Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, women who believe themselves called of God to this work.' Two-thirds of the synods voted favourably on the scheme, but ten rejected it outright. No further report was made till

1948 when the proposals were substantially unchanged, but Conference then reversed its earlier decisions and said 'The Conference declines to declare its willingness to receive for Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments women who believe themselves called of God to this work'.

No further action was taken until the appointment of this committee in 1959.

C. Biblical and Theological Considerations

The Ministry of Women in the New Testament and in subsequent Church History has been set out in Part 1 of this report. Our examination of this has confirmed the finding of the committee that reported to Conference in 1933, saying 'we cannot find there is any function of the ordained Ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex'. The statement on 'Ordination in the Methodist Church', approved in 1960, contains nothing that would exclude a woman from ordination on the ground of her sex alone.

D. Practical Considerations

i. The Work of the Ministry.

A minister is called upon to preach the Gospel, lead his people in worship and fellowship, visit, appeal to and win those who are outside the Church, prepare people for membership, succour the bewildered and bereaved, give counsel in marriage and family life, train leaders and preachers, administer the Sacraments, conduct business meetings, take his place in the community, and, if he is a family man, play his part in the home. He is expected to be a real leader of his people and a person to whom anyone may turn in times of distress, anxiety, difficulty or success.

In those called to the Ministry we therefore look for scholarship, leadership, strength (physical, emotional and spiritual), sympathetic understanding and administrative ability. We cannot expect one person to excel in all these qualities, but the Minister who is to command respect and be effective among his people must have a certain measure of each of them in his personality.

Our problem is to consider whether women can meet these tremendous demands on an equal footing with men. Their scholarship and intellectual ability is beyond question; women have proved themselves in the service of the Church to be conscientious, attentive to detail and responsive to the things of the spirit. Their sympathetic understanding and interest in people equip them for pastoral duties, but it is debatable to what extent men would bring their personal problems to a woman minister. It is sometimes held that a Deaconess in pastoral charge of a Society builds up a Church that is predominantly female, but the same is often true of Churches under the care of a man.

Women are liable to face problems in an emotional and personal way and thus be exposed to nervous strain in difficult situations. Furthermore, the unmarried woman would have voluntarily to face the loneliness of having no partner with whom her life could be shared. Whilst this is also true of men who remain bachelors, what is the exception among the men would be the norm among women ministers.

ii. The Call and Training.

If it were thought that the difficulties were decisive we should conclude that a woman who claimed to be called to the ministry was under a delusion, that God did

not intend women to be ministers, and that the traditional exclusion of women from the ministry was a true insight into the mind and purpose of God.

In support of this, it is sometimes argued that even in Churches where they are accepted, comparatively few women feel the call. It may be that a smaller proportion of women than men have the necessary qualifications for the work. But in every profession that has been traditionally male the number of women entrants is at first small, and remains a minority. In any case, the question of numbers cannot be regarded as crucial in matters of the Spirit.

It has been said that few women desire to be Ministers, but entry into the Ministry is by the call of God, confirmed by the Church. Where the Church declines to admit women it is not to be expected that women will think of the Ministry as God's way for them.

If women should be accepted for the Methodist Ministry it would be undesirable to separate their training from that of the men, for our Ministry is *one* Ministry. They should receive the same training as the men, in the same colleges.

iii. Stationing

If women are admitted they should come in on terms of equality with men, stationed in Circuits and not accepted simply for specialist work under a Department. It is open to question how far Circuit Stewards would consider inviting a woman to fill an appointment hitherto held by a man. It is equally difficult to determine how many Deaconesses would remain in pastoral charge of societies in preference to a Minister, if one were available at the same cost to the Circuit. The general tendency is for a Deaconess to be replaced by a Minister when the financial situation permits.

There is little evidence of a desire on the part of the Methodist people for Women Ministers, and the Stationing Committee might have difficulty in finding a suitable appointment for a woman who had not received an invitation.

A Woman Minister must be free to hold any office – Superintendent of a Circuit, Chairman of a District, President of the Conference, but as these offices depend on the action of a Quarterly Meeting, Synod or Conference, such matters might well be left to find their own solution in due course.

iv. Marriage

As in the Deaconess Order, no vow of celibacy could be demanded, and whilst many teachers, doctors and other professional women are able to continue their careers after marriage, a Woman Minister in Methodism would not normally be able to do so. She could not care for a Church and at the same time fulfil her family responsibilities, nor should any woman be encouraged to neglect her home to serve the Church. A further obstacle to service after marriage is our itinerant system.

If a married woman were not able to continue her ministry there would be two possible lines of action for the Church: either to accept her resignation, or to give her the status formerly known as 'without pastoral charge'. If the latter course were adopted she would no longer be stationed, but would remain a Minister, giving such service as she could, subject to ministerial discipline, and answerable to the Ministerial session of her Synod. There are circumstances easily envisaged, such as early widowhood, in which it might be possible for her to resume her ministry.

Whichever course is adopted a fundamental difficulty emerges, revealing a real difference between the Ordination of a man and of a woman, and one which cannot lightly be disregarded. When a man accepts a call to the Ministry, he is ordained for lifelong service; his vows are only to be set aside if he loses his faith or his sense of call. These are grievous possibilities that no ordinand envisages, and marriage will not hinder or halt his Ministry. With a woman it is different. If she should desire to marry, her new duties would normally take precedence over her former ones. The duties of the Ministry may take second place to the call to become a wife and mother.

If women are to be admitted to the Ministry this point must be faced and understood by the Church. If marriage is a 'natural' event in a woman's life should it annul her call and ordination any more than illness or infirmity does that of a man? If it is a 'divinely ordered' event to which God calls her, does the second call deny the first, or only limit its scope? Because of the functional differences between husband and wife the ordination of a woman must carry implications that do not hold in the ordination of a man.

v. Ecumenical relationships.

The bearing of the admission of women to the Ministry on our relations with other churches was considered by the committee. It was agreed that the ecumenical aspect of any proposed major change in Church Order was a factor that must be taken into account before a final decision is reached. This issue arises particularly when Churches are actually engaged in 'conversations' in order to end such divisions as impair their unity in Christ, and when the possibility of change was not envisaged by either Church when it was agreed to meet in conference.

Conclusion

We are not able to bring a Conference recommendation on the Admission of Women to the Ministry that would command the support of all the members of the committee, and we have good reason to believe that the division among us accurately reflects the corresponding division among the Methodist people.

We have become increasingly aware of practical problems, such as those outlined in Section D of Part 3 of this report. These would have to be faced, and for some of them there is no facile solution. We do not consider that it would be in the best interests of the Church, or of those women who may feel a call to serve God as Deaconesses or Ministers, if Conference were asked to make an immediate decision about this. We recommend that there should first be an opportunity for the subject to be considered as fully as possible at Circuit and District level, and we commend this report to the Church for study and discussion.

(Agenda 1961, pp. 13-28)

The Conference deleted the last 21 words of the penultimate paragraph and inserted a new sentence between the third and fourth lines of the last paragraph: 'Nevertheless, having stated the practical problems, it is recognised that the issue facing the Church is whether it is God who is calling women to the Methodist ministry. A consideration of practical difficulties is part of our task in seeking God's will, but what He wills is always possible.'

Major reports on diaconal ministry were adopted by the Conferences of 1993, 1995 and 1997 (see Volume 2, pp. 291-346).