

Editorial

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This special edition of the 'Theology and Ministry' journal originated in an ecumenical conference on diaconal ministry held in St. John's College, Durham in September 2011. The conference was organised by the Wesley Study Centre with funding from the Methodist Church in Britain as part of a broader research project funded by this denomination into 'Good Practice in Diaconal Ministry'.¹ Each of the articles within this special edition is based on contributions made by the respective authors to this conference. The articles have also been developed and informed by subsequent dialogue that this conference and the wider research project helped to stimulate.

Collectively, the articles reflect both some of the diversity of views held by different people in different denominations relating to the diaconate, and some of the range of related experiences and perspectives on how this ministry might develop in the future. Paul Avis's article sets the debate about the diaconate in an ecumenical context, highlighting the important place of this ministry in the way that churches are reshaping themselves in response to the contemporary context. He also highlights the continuing biblical debates about the origins of this ministry that are important in understanding its contribution. Maurice Staton's article draws on doctoral research that extensively traces the way that the diaconate has developed in the Methodist Church in Britain, and the debates that have continued to influence these developments and their wider impact in Church and society. Todd Stockdale's article shares findings from contemporary empirical research into deacon's understandings of their ministry in the same denomination, exploring the relationship between purposes and processes within this ministry. Joseph Wood's article explores the tensions and dilemmas being faced by the Church of the Nazarene in relation to the diaconate, as this denomination reaches a crossroads in its own understanding of this ministry. The special edition concludes with an article in which David Clark considers the significance of the Methodist Diaconal Order's

¹ Further details about the conference, including recordings of some of the keynote speeches which are available to download for free, can be found at: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/wsc.online/?s=diaconal+conference>. Further details of the research, including a free summary of the findings, are available from: http://www.dur.ac.uk/wsc.online/?page_id=1929. The full report on the research, *Making Connections: Exploring Contemporary Diaconal Ministry*, by Andrew Orton and Todd Stockdale, will be published soon by Sacristy Press.

life as a Religious Order, and what he suggests the wider Church might learn from these reflections as it continues to develop into the future.

Each of these articles brings out the often controversial nature of understandings of deacons' ministries, both within particular denominations and ecumenically. The aim of this special edition is not to present a unified view of the diaconate, nor to necessarily indicate editorial agreement with any of the positions taken. However, when considered collectively, the special edition does aim to highlight how much can be learnt from critically engaging in dialogue between different views on this important ministry. As each of the authors included within this special edition states in their own way, our understanding of the diaconate within particular denominations has much to say about our understandings of important practical theological aspects of the life of the Church, especially our understandings of ministry, ecclesiology and mission. Indeed, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere, reflecting ecumenically and internationally on this ministry is crucial in enabling the Church to resolve key tensions within its life in order to engage in God's mission more effectively in the contemporary context.² Discussions of this ministry increasingly prompt the Church to review what it considers ministry to be, and how all parts of the Church can participate in its mission. The history of the diaconate in relation to gender has played a particularly important role in this regard. Themes of understanding what is shared and different between different forms of ministry, both ordained and lay, also remain central to these debates. Equally, this ministry focuses attention on how the Church engages with those who are marginalised, excluded and hurting in a wide range of ways, and how it reaches out, engages with and learns from those who are not necessarily its members. All this debate is taking place in a context where diaconal ministries of various descriptions are changing and often growing having been renewed across a wide range of denominations worldwide.³

We are pleased to add to this literature, even in the small way possible through this special edition, and hope that this collection of articles stimulates further constructive debate that recognises the valuable contribution that continues to be made by this dynamic ministry.

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² A. Orton, 'The diverse and contested diaconate: Why understanding this ministry is crucial to the future of the church', *International Journal of Practical Theology*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (2012), 260-284.

³ See, for example, Diakonia World Federation Executive Committee, *Diaconal Reflections: How We Experience Our Diaconal Calling in Our Diversity*, <http://www.diakonia-world.org/files/theologiepapier98english.pdf>, (1998), last accessed 1 May 2013.