

The Development of Diaconal Ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain

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Abstract

This paper examines the origins and development of the Wesley Deaconess Order in the Methodist Church from 1890-1978 and the subsequent formation of a new model of the diaconate in the form of the Methodist Diaconal Order open to both men and women in 1986. In doing so, it highlights a number of issues which are important to broader questions of ministry within the wider Church. It is argued that this story and history of what has gone before can inform debates about ministry in the present. The article illustrates how patterns of ministry emerge within a social context, arising from a need for the Church to respond in a practical way to a given set of circumstances.

From 1972 to 1993, there was a continuing debate in Methodism concerning the value of a permanent diaconate that was both an order of ministry and a religious order. The paper looks closely at this struggle for identity, recognition and equality of ministry in the period until the Methodist Conference recognised the Methodist Diaconal Order in 1993.

Keywords: Deaconess; Women; Ministry; History; Methodist; Religious Order

Introduction

This article tells the story of the historical development of diaconal ministry in British Methodism. It highlights a number of issues that are important to broader questions of ministry within the wider Church, namely:

- i) the struggle for recognition of this ministry;
- ii) the use and abuse of women in ministry;
- iii) the struggle for identity, including the struggle for the new identity of the Methodist Diaconal Order;
- iv) the question of whether deacons are seen as lay or ordained;

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- v) the struggle towards equal status of deacons with presbyters;
- vi) the relationship between diaconal ministry and the liturgy of the Church;
- vii) the question of being a religious order and/or an order of ministry.

Each of these issues is a continuing theme, which can be seen evolving as understandings of diaconal ministry have developed within the Methodist Church in Britain, as this article will explore. This article draws on research from my PhD Thesis that arose from interest stimulated when I was appointed as a presbyter to Harrogate to share in ministry with a deacon in the Methodist Church in 1994-1998.²

The Deaconess Movement in Nineteenth Century Britain

Discussions about the diaconate (and ministry more generally) take place in a particular context, and it is helpful to consider contemporary developments in the light of our story and the history of what has gone before. It is that story which has shaped us so far and can inform debates about our future. Patterns of ministry emerge within a social context and have arisen from a need for the Church to respond in a practical way to a given set of circumstances. No one model of diaconal ministry exists in scripture, as Dr Paula Gooder's work illustrates.³ Indeed, scripture illustrates that different models of ministry developed in different geographical areas. What were the social conditions that gave rise to a renewed interest in diaconal work in Methodism in the nineteenth century?

- i) crowded conditions in cities especially in the slum areas;
- ii) catastrophes in agriculture 1875-1899 which drove people from the land to seek work in expanding manufacturing industries;
- iii) the philanthropic movement in the mid-nineteenth century, which included responding to an awareness of poor working and living conditions, housing, education and the welfare of children;
- iv) the feminist movement. Middle class women were not expected to be wage earners, but they sought fulfilment through the caring work of the Church on a voluntary basis and later in receipt for a living allowance; i.e. a feminist movement away from the confines of domesticity, marriage and motherhood.⁴

These conditions led to a developing role by women in various forms of related work. For example, one of the side effects of the Crimea War 1854-56 was the institution of nursing as a profession for trained women, a movement that was largely inspired by Florence Nightingale. In 1840, the Quaker Elizabeth Fry had

²M.W. Stator, 'The Development of Diaconal Ministry in the Methodist Church: A Historical and Theological Study', (PhD. Thesis, Leeds University, 2001).

³ Paula Gooder, "Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins", *Ecclesiology*, 3(1), (2006), 33-56.

⁴ On feminist issues and the Wesley Deaconess Order, see Julie May, 'The Wesley Deaconess Order in Late Nineteenth Century England' (BA Thesis, Birmingham University, 1992).

founded an Institution for Nursing Sisters. The High Church Oxford Movement under John Henry Newman and E.B. Pusey encouraged the founding of Anglican Sisterhoods in the 1840s. The Low Church deaconess movement in the Evangelical Churches had an emphasis on community work without the separate communal life of prayer and life-long vows found in the High Church sisterhoods. Rev. John Howson (1816-1855) urged the need for professionally trained and paid deaconesses in the Church. He had visited the model of the nurse/deaconess institution founded by Pastor Fliedner in Kaiserswerth, Dusseldorf that opened in 1836. In 1862, Elizabeth Ferrard was 'set apart' as the first deaconess in the Church of England by the Bishop of London to serve in the parishes among the poor and the marginalised.

The Origins of the Wesley Deaconess Order in British Methodism

In this context, Rev. Dr Thomas Bowman Stephenson, a minister in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, founded the National Children's Home in London in 1869 and the Sisters of the Children in 1878 to care for the welfare of children. This was followed by the founding of the Sisters of the People to work in the Central Mission in London by Rev. Hugh Price Hughes in 1887. In 1890, Dr Stephenson founded the Wesley Deaconess Order following the ideal model of the nurse/deaconess employed in the 100-bed hospital that had opened in Kaiserswerth in Germany in 1842. The first deaconess house was opened in St Agnes Terrace, London in July 1890 with Sister Rita Hawkins as Sister-in-Charge and one probationer. By 1894, the Deaconess Institute was firmly established and the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of 1895 agreed to a constitution being drawn up, but the Deaconess Institute did not achieve Connexional status until 1902.⁵ Hence, it was some years after their initial formation in 1890 that the Wesleyan Methodist Conference finally approved the formation of the Wesley Deaconess Order.

In 1902, the headquarters of the Deaconess Institute moved to Ilkley and the Wesley Deaconess College was established with Rev. Dr Thomas Stephenson as Principal, whilst he was also the Superintendent of the Ilkley Circuit. In 1917, Rev. William Bradfield, the then Warden of the Wesley Deaconess Order, had to plead for financial help from the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion. Up to that point, money had come from Circuits where deaconesses were stationed.

The rise of the Wesley Deaconess Order from 1890 is all the more remarkable when one considers that the Wesleyan Methodist Church did not fully approve of women preaching from 1803 to 1918.⁶ As Graham states, 'the 1803 Conference regulation which enforced this was still in force' during this early period, and whilst this started to be relaxed over time, 'it was only in 1910 that the phrase "address only her own sex" was removed' from regulations setting out conditions of service for

⁵ Methodist terminology: *Connexion* is the term for the Methodist Church in England, Scotland and Wales under the jurisdiction of the British Methodist Conference. In 1932, the Primitive Methodists, the Wesleyan Methodists and the United Methodists came together to form the Methodist Church in Great Britain, i.e. the Methodist Connexion.

Circuit refers to a group of Methodist Churches under the supervision of a superintendent minister. *District* a region or group of circuits the head of which is called the Chair of the District.

⁶ See *Minutes of Conference*, Wesleyan Methodist Church, (1918), 85.

women preachers.⁷ It took until 1918 for equal official recognition to be given to women local preachers (i.e. equal to men) and the following year it was also given to deaconesses.⁸ This was despite there being deaconess evangelists in practice since 1891.

In 1890, Stephenson published his book *Concerning Sisterhoods* in which he traced the development of, and commented on, deaconess work from earliest times up to his own day. He put forward his three areas of usefulness for the Sisters:

- a) moral and spiritual education, usually in the context of an orphanage or school;
- b) ministry to the sick;
- c) evangelistic visitation in connection with mission and rural work.⁹

Stephenson sought to employ deaconesses in areas of work where they might be used as nurses, as staff in 'orphanages, asylums, homes for the poor' and other such institutions, and as effective and 'sympathetic' visitors.¹⁰ The Report to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference (1902-3) outlined a variety of deaconess work including a Church Deaconess sharing in the pastoral work of a congregation in a town or village: a Mission Deaconess attached to a City Mission or a Deaconess-Evangelist. This Report stated that she might also be a Deaconess-Nurse or a Deaconess-Teacher working in schools. Stephenson greatly favoured the idea of a Nurse-Deaconess and deaconesses with some nursing experience found that many doors opened to them in the course of their work. She may be a Slum-Deaconess 'caring for the very lowest'; or she may be engaged in Rescue work for women or for prisoners. Lastly, she may be a Foreign Missionary Deaconess carrying out any of the above duties overseas. We note that deaconesses were 'sent,' i.e. they were directly stationed by the Warden of the deaconess order to wherever the Church had need of them, as part of an itinerant ministry. This itinerant understanding of 'stationing' continued to 1978 when the Wesley Deaconess Order closed, and remains true of the Methodist Diaconal Order today.

Appointments and Employment of Wesley Deaconesses

It was reported in 1907 that there were 98 consecrated or fully accredited deaconesses and 56 probationer-deaconesses at work and 19 accepted for training, making a total of 173. The rapid growth of the Wesley Deaconess Institute 1890-1907 can be seen in the following statistics, as at that time:

- '5 are Officers of the Institute.
- 2 maintain and manage Doddington Home of Rest.

⁷ E. D Graham, *Saved to Serve: The Story of the Wesley Deaconess Order 1890-1978*, (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2002), 52

⁸ Graham, 52.

⁹ T. B Stephenson, *Concerning Sisterhoods*, (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1890), 62-70. For more on the development of the Wesley Deaconess Order in Methodism, 1890-1918, see Staton, 101-114.

¹⁰ Stephenson, 75.

80 are employed in circuits 20 in London and 60 in the provinces.
 37 are engaged in Central Missions; 8 in London and 29 elsewhere.
 15 are engaged in Foreign Missionary work.
 2 are Deaconess-Evangelists.
 3 are at home for health or family claims.
 10 are either Qualified or Probationer Nurses
 19 are Student-Probationers for College Training during the coming year.’¹¹

Once the Wesleyan Methodist Conference relaxed its stance on the preaching of women in 1910, several more deaconesses joined the list of Deaconess-Evangelists. After 1919, when Wesleyan Methodism finally gave official recognition to women preachers, more deaconesses were local preachers or regularly led services.¹²

World War I meant that many presbyters and probationers were called to serve in the war effort and deaconesses in Circuits and Missions took their places. Deaconess Appointments in 1918 included ‘other work’ in which we see the influence of war conditions.

Table 1

Deaconess Appointments 1918	
Missions	96
Circuits	105
Other Work	15
Special List	21
Foreign Missions	20
Ilkley College Staff	5
Students	9
Total	271
Retired List (in detail)	
Retired from Active Service	2
Invalid List	3
Home Claims	4
In Need of Rest	9
Travelling	2
Special Training	1
Total	21

¹¹ Graham, 247-248, originally compiled from the *Minutes of the Wesley Deaconess Institute* (Ilkley, 1895-1910) 303 and 292-293.

¹² Graham, 67.

Other Work	
Coalfield Mission (South Yorks.)	1
Hospital Nursing	4
Deaconess Evangelist	3
Munitions	4
Hull Vigilance Association	1
Army Camp	1
Girls' Club	1
Total	15

Source: Wesley Deaconess Institute; *List of Appointments, September 1917-1925*.
(Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Centre).

In 1918, the number of deaconesses in hospital work (4), in munitions factories (4) and in the army camp (1), clearly relates to the war conditions that prevailed. The Sisters served where they were needed most. Their work was a response to the social and economic conditions that prevailed. A study of the 1918 statistics reveals that there were almost as many deaconesses in Mission appointments (35 per cent) as in Circuits (39 per cent). When one considers that the vast majority of the 'other appointments' were in Circuits in the main urban areas, then one can detect in the deaconesses' work a missionary strategy that focused on the larger centres of population. 62 out of 271 appointments were in the London area. There were very few appointments in rural or semi-rural areas, which was not the case in the earlier period (1890-1914).

It is interesting to note that Convocation of the Wesley Deaconess Order in 1933 was concerned about the low profile of deaconesses and among the notices of motion was a request that the list of deaconess appointments be published along with those of presbyters in the *Minutes of Conference*. Dr Maltby, Warden of the Order, felt that this was highly unlikely. This profile was also reflected in their official status. Until 1900, students were 'recognised' after completing their probation and from 1901 they were 'consecrated'. At Methodist Union in 1932, a new *Book of Offices* was authorised by the Conference of 1936 in which deaconesses were said to be 'ordained'. Such 'ordinations' originally took place at Convocation of the Order and not at the annual Conference, as was the case for the ordination of presbyters.

In 1941, the Methodist Conference decided to 'examine what changes should be made in order to improve the Connexional status of the Order, to give increased recognition and security to the deaconesses, and to assist the extension of its valuable work and to report to the next Conference'.¹³ Among the topics under review was the question of allowing deaconesses more responsibility, for example in pastoral oversight of village churches and also through a review of the meagre allowance to Sisters in the active work. This is clear evidence of the guilt felt by the Church for having sometimes treated its deaconesses as spare parts, even making some redundant, something that could not happen to a presbyter. However, a report on the 'Ordination of Women to the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament' was rejected by the Conference of 1948.

¹³ *Minutes of Conference*, (1941), 217-218.

We note that the Warden of the Order remained a male presbyter appointed by Conference. This occurred from 1890 when the Order was founded to 1978 when the Order was closed to new recruits. In other words, deaconesses were under the authority of the ministers, i.e. presbyters. There continued to be a male Ministerial Secretary for the Wesley Deaconess Order until 1992. As far back as 1920, the desirability of the appointment of a suitable 'woman' as Warden of the Order had been suggested! Furthermore, until 1942, the Wesley Deaconess Order had no rights of representation in terms of the denomination's governance structures either in Synods or in Conference. Recognising the brave work of the Order in the war conditions, a higher profile was given in 1942 and there arose a wider demand for deaconesses arising from:

- a) the shortage of men in the circuits with the War effort and following the war;
- b) the high regard for deaconesses;
- c) the expansionist policy of the Church including new kinds of outreach work such as the new emphasis on caravan missions in the 1940's and 1950's.

From the war years to 1960, the deaconesses were increasingly given permission to celebrate the sacraments. That meant that diaconal and presbyteral roles were being confused; nor was that the answer to the question of women in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Interestingly, demand for deaconesses far exceeded supply in the 1950s and many requests were refused. The Order had been conscious that for many years some people regarded the ministry of the deaconesses as a 'second class' one and that due value was not given to their vocation, training and commitment.¹⁴

In 1961, 38 deaconesses had a dispensation to administer the sacrament of Holy Communion because they were in pastoral charge of one or more churches. In 1972, 48 per cent of all appointments were in circuits, but 56 deaconesses out of a total of 172 were in other work: an amazing 33 per cent. Many found they could fulfil their calling through the developing Local Authority Social Services Departments. Others turned to medical social work and community work.

Table 2

Analysis of Deaconess Appointments 1972-3

	London	Provinces	Total
Mission	22(41%)	27(23%)	49(28%)
Circuits	7(13%)	57(48%)	64(37%)
Other Work	25(46%)	31(26%)	56(33%)
Deaconess College	0(0%)	3(3%)	3(2%)
Total	54	118	172

Source: Personal Research (based on Wesley Deaconess Order; Annual List of Stations for Deaconesses).

¹⁴ Graham, (2002), 435

By 1972, a different picture had emerged. In London, the number of deaconesses employed in other kinds of work (46 per cent) had overtaken the number in the Mission appointments (41 per cent). This meant a change in the **training** of the members of the Order being made to take advantage of social sciences and psychology in preparation for service in the community that was beyond the demands of the Methodist Church. In 1962, a third year was added to the training course for deaconesses and a new curriculum was devised. This model of training changed prior to the closure of the specialist training college in Ilkley in 1968, with deaconesses starting to train alongside presbyters. This led to questions about the extent to which training should be similar or different from that provided for presbyters, questions that continue today.

The Birth of the Methodist Diaconal Order

When the Methodist Church opened presbyteral ministry to women in 1972, some thought that that spelled the end of the Wesley Deaconess Order.¹⁵ Women could now enter the presbyteral ministry of the Word and Sacrament. After all, many were doing just that in the circuits. The Church of England was struggling with the notion of a permanent diaconate. In 1975, the Baptist Church and Congregationalists closed deaconess orders and made them ministers by a vote of their annual Conference.¹⁶ However, not all Methodist deaconesses were happy with any proposals to change their status, because some felt called to be deaconesses and not presbyters, and thus they refused to change their status. The Methodist Church sought a middle way and in 1978 closed the Wesley Deaconess Order to new recruits and tried to find a new model of the diaconate. Those remaining in the Order felt abandoned by the Church. A Working Party under the Division of Ministries dealt with, among other things, (1) - an analysis of the numbers of deaconesses in the active work and an 'educated guess' at future numbers; (2) - how, by deaconesses working alongside presbyters, there might be a 'releasing of the spirit of *diakonia* in local churches'; (3) - how the work of the Wesley Deaconess Order might be reassessed; (4) - the possibility of a wider diaconate including the notion of a new order of lay service within the Church; (5) - the question of training for the future when it was clear what sort of diaconate might be established; and (6) - the need for more finance to train a wider diaconate. In the end, Conference decided in 1986 that the existing model of a religious order should continue but be re-opened to both male and female recruits. (At this point, it was still called the Wesley Deaconess Order!). A committee was set up to review the training of candidates for what became the proposed new Methodist Diaconal Order.

From 1972 to 1986, there was a continuing debate in Methodism counting on:

¹⁵ For more information, see Stator, 229-236.

¹⁶ The Deaconess Council January 23rd 1975 put forward the following Resolution to the Baptist Union Council in March 1975, which was passed by the Assembly later that year:

'Believing that the function of a deaconess, has under God, become that of a minister, at the meeting of the Deaconess Council held on 23rd January 1975, it was unanimously agreed to request the Deaconess Committee to act on their behalf in all matters appertaining to the transfer of the active Deaconesses to the Ministerial List and the dissolution of the Deaconess Order.'

i) the notion of permanence, i.e. the value of a permanent diaconate and not just a necessary step towards ordination for the priesthood. In the Church of England, for example, ordination is first to the diaconate and for most at a later stage, to the presbyteral ministry. The Methodist Church was making the case for a permanent diaconal ministry.

ii) an order of ministry, i.e. ordained, set apart to lead the people of God. While the presbyteral order is centred on the sacraments and preaching, the diaconate is focussed on establishing bridges with the local community and also the enabling of the people of God to exercise their gifts and ministry.

iii) the notion of a religious order, i.e. a community of prayer and mutual support. The deaconesses in Methodism were, by tradition, a religious order that exercised ministry as lay persons and it was felt important to maintain that emphasis in the constitution of the new diaconal order.

iv) the meaning of both presbyteral and diaconal ministries. The Methodist Conference 1972 directed the Faith and Order Committee to examine the meaning of both presbyteral and diaconal ministries¹⁷.

In 1986, a second order of ministry in Methodism was approved by the Conference and in 1987 the first list of candidates was drawn up: 28 in all, 16 women and 12 men. There was initially no new title to the Order, no constitutional basis, no candidating procedure, no service of recognition into full membership of any proposed Order. The title 'The Methodist Diaconal Order' was approved in 1988 and the first ordinations to the diaconate took place in the Conference of 1990, exactly one hundred years after the formation of the Wesley Deaconess Order.¹⁸ Two men and two women were ordained at the Conference in Cardiff. Not until the Conference at Scarborough in 1998 were all ordained members of the diaconate 'received into Full Connexion' by a Standing Vote of Conference. This meant that the ministry of deacons was finally given full recognition and authority by the Methodist Conference on a par with presbyters.

In 1993, the Methodist Diaconal Order was recognised by the Conference as both an order of ministry and a religious order and an attempt was made to work out what was meant by 'ordained to the diaconate of God'. That was seven years after it had opened its doors to candidates! Thus the Methodist Church was following its practice of working out the theological implications of decisions already made. A number of practical issues remained unresolved for a while; for example, was a deacon a member of Ministerial Session of Conference? The answer proposed to that question was to hold a separate Diaconal Session of Conference.

¹⁷ *Minutes of Conference, (1972), 39.*

¹⁸ 'The Ministry of the People of God', Report to Conference (1988) included the following sentence concerning the new Methodist Diaconal Order: '...three factors, - ordination, life-long commitment and availability for stationing - indicate a parallel with the ordained ministry, from which it be distinguished by being diaconal rather than presbyteral', (*Agenda, Representative Session of Conference, 1988*), 16.

Historically, diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church was also contained in the ministry of lay people who served as class leaders, pastoral visitors, lay preachers, church stewards and in other capacities. Ordained deacons in the Methodist Diaconal Order are now seen as a focus and representation of the servant ministry of the whole Church and their ordination status is not meant to undermine the ministry of the laity. Diaconal ministry is the responsibility of the whole people of God and 'deacons' are the specific ministry that provide a focus and enabling role for this to take place. This represented a major shift in Methodist thinking.

The Place of the Diaconate and the Worship of the Church

I want at this point to make a plea. The ministry of deacons must be closely linked with the liturgical life of the Church. In other words, they should be seen to assist in the worship of the Church. That does not include presiding at the celebration of Holy Communion, which is understood as a presbyteral role even though deacons have occasionally been granted special dispensation in exceptional circumstances. Historically, deaconesses in Methodism were primarily evangelists and closely linked with the worship and witness of the Church. In the Early Church, the distribution of alms to the poor in the community by deacons was focused in their liturgical role within the worshipping life of the Church, e.g. deacons would lead prayers of intercession. The Greek *leitourgia* includes both the notion of liturgy and that of work as public service and ministry. Deacons are not just social workers but 'ambassadors' personifying the Church's proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Deed'.¹⁹ Ordination for the deacon signifies the sacred mandate to teach and lead the People of God.²⁰ As Pinnock states:

'From the first, diaconal ministry has had these two aspects: service of the Lord's table of Word and Sacrament, and the service of the needy'.²¹

The *Anglo-Nordic Diaconal Research Project* (1999) highlights the principle that a proper understanding of the diaconate is rooted in ecclesiology, i.e. in our understanding of the Church and not only in perceived need.²² That is what determines the nature and form of ordained ministry. Too often, the diaconate is used to respond only to whatever is needful and that is what determines the pattern of their ministry. This question of the relationship between the worship of God in the Church and the ministry of the deacon is important and something which is also addressed within other articles in this special edition.

¹⁹ G. Borgegard and C. Hall, (eds.), *Ministry of the Deacon: Anglican – Lutheran Perspectives*, Nordic Ecumenical Council, (Uppsala: Sweden, 1999), 252.

²⁰ J. N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002), esp. Chapter 4. Collins writes of the loss of the values and sacred mandate within Christian communities and the scriptures once attributed to *diakonia*, 133.

²¹ Jill Pinnock, 'The History of the Diaconate' in C. Hall, (ed.), *The Deacon's Ministry* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1992), 10.

²² G. Borgegard, O. Fanuelsen, and C. Hall (eds.), *Ministry of the Deacon*, Vol. 2. *Ecclesiological Perspectives*, Nordic Ecumenical Council, (Uppsala: 2000), 41-65.

Conclusion

It is important to know past history in order to see the ways that it has informed and influenced the present. Diaconal ministry in Methodism evolved from the enthusiastic and dedicated work of full-time female workers in the Wesley Deaconess Order who were originally understood to be lay workers. The dominant factors that determined patterns of diaconal service were the various social needs and their historic contexts. From the start, deaconesses were seen as evangelists, whether verbally, such as in the caravan missions or practically through showing the love of God for all people in their nursing/caring roles.

There has been a gradual recognition in Methodism of the ordained status of this ministry, through seeing deacons as 'consecrated' to eventually recognising them as 'ordained'. Pragmatic responses by the Church to changing circumstances have played a key role in this developing history, in which new theological understandings have emerged that recognised the equality of women's contributions and the need for a distinct ordained ministry of deacons (both men and women) to complement that of presbyters. With the advent of the twentieth century, the question of women's ministry raised theological questions concerning equality of status and employment. Following World War II, deaconesses were used to fill ministerial posts, even including the administration of the sacraments, but they were not given status or remuneration equal to that of the men. In the 1970s, women sought to fulfil their ministry outside the structures of the Church and new patterns of diaconal ministry emerged.²³ Such action has an implicit theology that has to do with serving Christ in the needs of the world and thus extending the Church's witness.

The story of the emergence of diaconal ministry in Methodism is the story of a pioneer ministry and of a long struggle for recognition and justice, and the turning a lay order into an order of ordained diaconal ministry alongside presbyters. That point was finally reached in 1986. Thomas Bowman Stephenson had the vision of a diaconate for both men and women a hundred years earlier!²⁴ It is somewhat ironic to remind ourselves that diaconal ministry seeks to resist those forces that degrade humankind and works towards restoring the image of God and human dignity in people everywhere. The question of equality of status between the two orders of ministry has remained a contentious issue. Deacons today are still seen by some people in the Church as lay persons, despite their having been ordained by the Church which refers to them as an order of ministry. Historically, deacons in Methodism have come to be understood as belonging to both a religious order and an order of ministry to sustain them in their work and witness. This understanding of their ministry has evolved gradually, forming a framework for the service they offer, which has adapted in ways that have responded to the needs of the Church and wider society. In this they have continued throughout their history to offer

²³ Cf. Staton, 229-235 for more detail.

²⁴ Stephenson, T. B. Address 'Deacons and Deaconesses', (1897), published in 'Highways and Hedges', magazine of the Wesley Deaconess Order, 1897,172. Cf. Staton, (2001), 112.

themselves to be sent, not only to where they are needed, but as the early deaconesses prided themselves, 'to those who need us most'.²⁵

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²⁵ Graham, 67, quoting 'The Agenda', magazine of the Wesley Deaconess Order, (January 1924), 10-11.

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Divisional Board Minutes, 1977-1979

File 1/3 Division of Ministries Executive Committee, 1992-1996

File 1/4 Division of Ministries, Minutes and Papers

Box 48. Division of Ministries Executive Committee, 1983-1987