

# The hallmark of the Methodist Diaconal Order – its life as a Religious Order – and some implications for the future of Methodism

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## Abstract

This article argues that the distinctiveness and importance of the Methodist Diaconal Order lies primarily in its standing as a religious order. It is this standing that should shape its life and work as an order of ministry. The hallmarks of what it means to be a Christian community are described and their presence within the life, organization and work of the Order identified. It is argued that Methodism should be aware that moves to integrate presbyteral and diaconal selection, training and oversight could weaken the Order's distinctiveness as a religious order. The article sets out what a deeper appreciation of the character of the Order as a religious community could offer Methodism, not least how this might enable the latter's ministry to reclaim its heritage as a religious order. Issues that the Order needs to address in order to re-invigorate its life and work as a religious order, and thereby strengthen its contribution to Methodism and the wider world, are noted.

**Keywords:** Methodist; Deacon; Religious Order; Community; Mission; Ministry

## Introduction

In 1992, the British Methodist Conference took the important step of recognising the Methodist Diaconal Order of the Methodist Church as *an order of ministry and a religious order*. This decision formally acknowledged the long history of diaconal ministry within British Methodism, embodied throughout the twentieth century in the life and work of the Wesley Deaconess Order and, since 1986, in that of its successor, the Methodist Diaconal Order, now an Order open to men as well as women. As noted in Staton's article earlier in this journal edition, the decision of the 1992 Conference set the office and work of deacons on an equal footing with that of presbyters.

However, since then, it has been its work as an order of ministry that has been regarded by Methodism as the Methodist Diaconal Order's hallmark. Its life as a religious community has been seen as largely of internal interest to the Order itself and thus not of particular significance for the Connexion as a whole. This paper

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takes the opposite point of view. It argues that *the Methodist Diaconal Order's 'unique contribution' to Methodism lies in its life as a religious community becoming a model of how the Connexion might reshape and empower its ministry and mission at this critical stage in its history.*<sup>2</sup>

### **An Order of Ministry - the Problem of Distinctiveness**

Over its long history, the Wesley Deaconess Order was involved in a wide diversity of ministries, these only narrowing in scope in the 1960s and 1970s when its membership dropped to some 60 or 70 active deaconesses. Since the Methodist Diaconal Order came into being in 1986, the number of deacons has steadily grown - in 2012, there being 132 active, 31 probationer, 32 student and 121 supernumerary deacons.<sup>3</sup> With this growth, the diversity of ministries has also increased. As a result deacons now occupy a plethora of roles from children's workers and youth leaders to community workers, from worship leaders and pastoral visitors to exercising major responsibility for one or more congregations, from street pastors to chaplains, from workers in the voluntary sector to those employed in the Health Service and Social Services.

Though enabling the Methodist Diaconal Order to respond to a wide variety of demands, the increasing diversity of diaconal appointments has created a number of problems. One is that lay members of the Methodist Church, once familiar with the work of Wesley deaconesses, though more so in the north of England than the south, are now hard put to understand what role is distinctive and held in common by all members of the Methodist Diaconal Order.

Another problem has arisen from the fact that at the same time as the new Methodist Diaconal Order was getting underway, the Methodist Church was also developing the role of 'lay worker'; that is, lay employees appointed to undertake specialised appointments within Circuits. Their occupations now include 'evangelists, administrators, pastoral workers, schools workers, family and children's workers, and youth development workers to name but a few'.<sup>4</sup>

One outcome has been that lay workers are currently undertaking roles virtually identical to those of deacons. However, an important difference is that lay workers are usually cheaper to employ. Consequently, Circuits facing financial problems are increasingly opting to employ lay workers rather than deacons. At the same time, the number of active Methodist deacons continues to rise. Consequently, a concern coming rapidly over the horizon is that of whether or not there will be enough Circuits wanting (or financially able) to employ deacons.<sup>5</sup>

It could be argued that, the issue of the increasing diversity of ministries apart, the Methodist Diaconal Order finds its true identity in being an *ordained* order of

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<sup>2</sup> *What is a Deacon?* Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2004) 7.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Diaconal Order* to the Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> *Lay Workers' Terms and Conditions*, Methodist Conference (Methodist Publishing: Peterborough, 2007), 1.3.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Diaconal Order* to the Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2011).

ministry. It is argued by the British Methodist Conference that through this office 'the calling of the whole Church is focused and represented' in a way that is neither true of lay workers nor of the laity in general.<sup>6</sup> However, as a basis for the Order's distinctiveness, such an argument is not wholly convincing. Firstly, Methodism's Deed of Union asserts that the ordained ministry does not possess any priesthood that is not shared with the whole people of God.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, in the expectations of the Connexion, it is presbyters who are usually regarded as its primary foci and representatives. Thirdly, beyond the life of the church, few people have any idea what the office of deacon signifies and thus the title carries little public recognition or standing.

The question remains, therefore, as to whether the most significant contribution of the Methodist Diaconal Order to church and world depends on its identity as an order of ministry, or whether it lies elsewhere.

### **The Communal Imperative**

The benchmark report to the Methodist Conference of 2004 entitled *What is a Deacon?* states that: 'The form that diaconal ministry takes... changes over time in response to the needs of the world and the missionary task of the church'.<sup>8</sup> In seeking to clarify where diaconal ministry should be heading, therefore, we need to begin with 'the needs of the world'.

### **The Needs of Today's World**

The new century presents humankind, and thus the church, with as daunting a task as it has ever faced. At the top of the agenda are such issues as how to preserve the natural resources of planet Earth, manage the destructive consequences of climate change, resolve the problems of a growing global population, overcome new endemic diseases and handle nuclear power responsibly. Along with these immediate concerns, humankind faces the ever-present task of lifting billions out of poverty and hunger, and of creating a just and peaceful world.

However, these problems mask a deeper challenge. I have argued elsewhere that they will never be solved unless it is recognized that human survival depends on a world that learns to live and work together as a global community of communities.<sup>9</sup> 'God comes to us in the midst of human need,' writes Parker Palmer, 'and the most pressing needs of our time demand community in response'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Conference Statement on Ordination*, Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Clause Four of the Methodist Church Act, (1976), and Clause Four of the Deed of Union (the 'doctrinal' clause), (1932).

<sup>8</sup> *What is a Deacon?* 5.9.

<sup>9</sup> D. Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom - Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity* (London: Epworth Press, 2005), 3-12.

<sup>10</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice (QFP)* (London: Religious Society of Friends, 3rd ed., 2005), 23.48.

## The Kingdom Community

The task facing humanity is, therefore, to discover a new and dynamic vision of the nature of community, and to fashion communal forms, from the local to the global that can address the fundamental needs of today's world. In that context, the mission of the church is to work alongside humanity in that undertaking. This is not least because it is Christian faith which, through the image of what I have called *the kingdom community*, offers humanity a vision of community at its richest and most inclusive.

The image of the kingdom community is of supreme importance because it is rooted in and expressive of the omnipresence, grace and power of the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> It is a vision of community that offers humanity four invaluable gifts: those of life, liberation, love and learning. These gifts are both inclusive and universal.

- The gift of *life* reflects the generosity of God as Creator. It offers his assurance of adequate material and physical provision, of energy, of creativity and of the experience of being fully alive. Our response to this gift might include gratitude, celebration, praise, thanksgiving and generosity to others.
- The gift of *liberation* reflects the life and work of Christ as Liberator. It is about humanity's divine worth and potential. On a personal level, it offers affirmation, forgiveness and a new beginning. It frees us *from* guilt and fear *for* fulfilment and joy. On a collective level, it is a gift that liberates humanity *from* dependence and powerlessness *for* the creation of a just and peaceful world.
- The gift of *love* reflects the work of the Spirit as Unifier. It offers us the gift of *agape* and empowers us to love others. Our response might include compassion, caring, sharing, friendship, trust or loyalty and working for reconciliation in situations where relationships are broken.
- The gift of *learning* reflects all three Persons of the Trinity as a divine learning community. It offers us an exciting and demanding journey of spiritual discovery. It embraces curiosity, discernment, reflection, questioning, openness and perseverance.

In this context, the mission of the church becomes that of building a world of families, neighbourhoods, institutions, cities and societies that manifest the gifts of the kingdom community. *In that task, the church becomes the servant of the kingdom community: 'a diaconal church'*. Servanthood is not primarily about service, though it includes that, but about wholehearted dedication and obedience to a Person, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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<sup>11</sup> A full discussion of the kingdom community and its gifts is contained in *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*, 13-46.

The gifts of the kingdom community are not innocuous gifts. If they are accessed and brought to bear on the life of society, they inevitably clash with powerful forces which promote a culture of greed and exploitation, foster injustice and violence, debase and devalue compassion, allow ignorance and promote indoctrination. Thus the gifts of the kingdom community inevitably confront those principalities and powers, which would divide and fragment our world.

The gifts of the kingdom community cannot realise their potential if they remain only abstract theological concepts. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues, 'what matters at this stage (in human history) is *the construction of local forms of community* within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us'.<sup>12</sup> His point is that if gifts and virtues such as those which the kingdom community embodies are to be understood, appreciated, applied and sustained, they need to be manifest within real-life communities; 'communities of practice' as they are sometimes called.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, a mission strategy committed to offering the gifts of the kingdom community to humankind will only have credibility if the medium, a community of practice, is also the message.

*It is my contention that the Methodist Diaconal Order as a religious community of practice has been and remains in a unique position to meet that requirement and to be a model for church and world alike of what it means to be a servant of the kingdom community.*

### **The Methodist Diaconal Order as a Religious Community**

In what follows, I describe a number of features of the Methodist Diaconal Order as a religious order that, I believe, frequently embody the gifts of the kingdom community. These features are described in terms of 'best practice'. The Order is only too aware of how often it falls short of these ideals. Nevertheless, my argument is that the Order's primary contribution to church and world lies in the way in which its life and work as an order of ministry is shaped, enriched and empowered by its making manifest the communal gifts of the kingdom.

### **Convocation – all the gifts of the kingdom community**

One major event in the Order's calendar could be seen as embodying all the gifts of the kingdom community: its annual Convocation. This is normally held over four days at the Hayes Conference Centre in Derbyshire. Convocation is the one occasion each year when all active deacons, students in training and many retired deacons gather together.

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<sup>12</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed., 1985), 263, my italics.

<sup>13</sup> A term coined by Etienne Wenger in relation to the business world. See E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and E. Wenger, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

Convocation bears witness to the gift of *life* in a number of ways. Collective worship is creative and inspiring. It includes heartfelt hymn singing, live music and spiritually inspiring visual aids. Convocation is also an occasion for much fun and laughter, with at least one structured event arranged to foster collective enjoyment.

Convocation demonstrates the gift of *liberation*. All attending, including those recently ordained, candidates for ordination, those about to retire, guests from other churches and the partners of deacons present gain a sense of significance through being personally identified and welcomed. The many opportunities to share hopes and fears about life and work with fellow deacons bring support and encouragement.

The gift of *love* is evident in the strong sense of caring and sharing that pervades Convocation. At the opening service each area group brings a candle to the front to affirm its solidarity with the Order. Deacons are encouraged to collectively identify with the concerns of the Order by being brought up to date with the latest news and issues relating to its life and work. There is lively engagement in many sessions and decisions are democratically taken. Common meals and meetings of year groups and friends strengthen a sense of solidarity. Arrangements are made to deliver greetings and gifts to elderly deacons unable to be present.

Convocation also furthers the gift of *learning*. There are plenary bible studies and lectures. A variety of workshops also play an important part here.

In sociological terms, Convocation is communally a very important 'symbolic event'. Its impact continues for months afterwards. It is also an occasion that makes a deep and positive impression on guests and speakers who frequently express surprise at its vitality, warmth and dynamism.

There are numerous other features of the life of the Order, less central than Convocation, which also reveal the presence of one or more of the gifts of the kingdom community, as described under the headings below.

### **The Gift of *Life***

Methodist deacons generally experience a strong sense of security, as far as is possible being assured of a job of work, a house, a stipend and a pension. They are also encouraged to find a rhythm to life that includes rest and recreation. This is an aspect of a wider 'Rule of Life' (discussed further later in this paper).<sup>14</sup> Area groups, which meet at least three times a year, are occasions for creative worship, shared meals, lively discussion and a good deal of laughter.

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<sup>14</sup> See: *Rule of Life*, <http://www.methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk/index.php?page=rule-of-life>

### **The Gift of Liberation**

The Methodist Diaconal Order has surmounted earlier gender divisions and is now open to men as well as women. The former, though a minority, are regarded as full members of the Order.

The Order values all its members. Student deacons and retired deacons are seen as integral to the life and work of the Order and involved as far as possible in its decision-making. Retired deacons continue to be members of area groups, are included in the Daily Prayer List (see below), and are called upon to express their opinion on current issues and concerns facing the Order.<sup>15</sup> *The Daily Prayer List* is a key publication reinforcing the value of every member of the Order. It emphasises that 'each counts and all matter' by ensuring that, on one day every four months, the personal and family concerns of each deacon are shared and prayed for by the whole Order. For example, in 2011-12, for the first time, the manual included a head-and-shoulders photo of nearly every deacon, an initiative which aids the memory and identification of those who are widely dispersed and may meet only at Convocation.

Through its website, the Order enables its members to keep in touch by sharing personal news and views. Via this form of networking individuals can make their concerns known, be supported and receive the reflections, guidance and encouragement of their fellow deacons.

Deacons experience the gift of liberation in particular through the work in which they are involved. This is one of the positive outcomes of the increasing diversity of ministries mentioned above. The matching of occupations with a deacon's interests, skills and attributes, together with the care with which deacons are stationed, enables them to experience personal fulfilment in their work. The fact that the Order is itinerant means that interest and commitment can be sustained over many years, or renewed if all has not gone well in a previous appointment.

### **The Gift of Love**

The Methodist Diaconal Order is exceptional in the pastoral care it offers to its members. Its Pastoral Care Co-ordinator and Pastoral Care Committee have a wide brief ranging from matters to do with diaconal appointments to personal and family issues. The Co-ordinator comments: 'How we express our care for each other within the Order can be a measure of what we hope and desire for all God's creation'.<sup>16</sup>

The pastoral care of deacons is also undertaken through the work of area groups that spend a good deal of time monitoring the wellbeing of their members. Pastoral visits to deacons living in the same region, cards and emails offering support or greetings on birthdays or similar events are legion. *The Daily Prayer List* referred to

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<sup>15</sup> *The Daily Prayer List* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, 2012-2013), updated and reprinted annually.

<sup>16</sup> *Convocation Handbook* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, 2011), 58.

above ensures a personal and prayerful response to the longer term needs of colleagues.

Regular communication helps to engender a sense of solidarity. The website and the frequent *Order Paper* carry a message from the Warden, news about members of the Order, *Twenty to Ten* prayer needs (see below) and a section on business matters.<sup>17</sup>

The Order's 'Mother House'<sup>18</sup> and pastoral centre in Birmingham has always been, in sociological terms, 'a symbolic place' which gives a communal heart to a widely dispersed membership. 'It provides the spiritual and physical focus for this dispersed religious community, and is regarded as a spiritual home', states *What is a Deacon?*<sup>19</sup> Until recently the Centre has been used not only for administration and business meetings but, with residential accommodation available, as a place of hospitality and informal encounter. At the centre, a *Twenty to Ten* time is set aside each morning to offer prayer for the Order and deacons elsewhere invited to join in praying at this time wherever they are if possible. The Centre houses the Order's prayer candle and its prayer diary.<sup>20</sup> Prayer spaces have also been available to visitors.

### **The Gift of Learning**

Though numbers are relatively small, every effort is made to ensure that student deacons can share their training with other student deacons and presbyters. Following ordination, deacons undertake probationary studies. In-service training is more ad hoc and largely left to the initiative of the deacon concerned. Informal learning goes on through Convocation, area groups and retreats.

The Order also arranges occasional consultations and conferences. For example, in 2011, a consultation with Church of England deacons was held at the Order's centre in Birmingham.<sup>21</sup> The Order's Faith and Work Group also set up a consultation there for deacons involved in chaplaincy; plus, a large conference, 'Making Connections: Exploring Good Practice in Diaconal Ministry' was organized in Durham by the Wesley Study Centre in conjunction with the Methodist Diaconal Order and wider Methodist Church. Such occasions build on a long heritage of ecumenical and international involvement with deacons of other churches and important contributions that the Order has made over the years in conversations concerning the theology and practice of diaconal ministry.

### **Communal Leadership**

The leadership of the Order remains an essential means of furthering the gifts of the kingdom community. In recent years, the Order's form of leadership has changed radically. For most of the history of the Wesley Deaconess Order, the Warden of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Order Paper* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, every quarter).

<sup>18</sup> As it is called in *What is a Deacon?*, 7.8.1.

<sup>19</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 6.6.

<sup>20</sup> *In the Navy...* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, 2011-2012), 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> *Convocation Handbook*, 87-103.



Order was a male Methodist presbyter, and there was little wider consultation with the Order. Since the Order re-opened, the Warden has become 'first among equals', from 2008 to 2012 working closely with a team of five other deacons. However, there was little wider consultation with the Order.

Since the Order re-opened, the Warden has become 'first among equals', from 2008 to 2012 working closely with a team of five. Each team member has carried responsibility for one aspect of the work of the Order: pastoral care, vocations, communication, or budgets and resources. 'This has been a very successful development and much appreciated by the members of the Order,' comments Deacon Jackie Fowler.<sup>22</sup> The leadership team has sought to relate closely to a number of diaconal committees whose members have been democratically elected by the Order. Area Group Co-ordinators also play an important part in leadership.<sup>23</sup>

The Warden of the Order, elected for a six-year period, gives particular attention to the roles of animator (life), enabler (liberation) and intermediary (love). She travels widely to ensure that deacons are trained effectively, stationed appropriately and supported pastorally. She represents the Order to the Methodist Church, as well as the Methodist Church to the Order. In this capacity, she becomes a significant 'symbolic figure' with responsibility for enhancing diaconal collegiality amongst a widely-scattered constituency.

### **Ordination and a Rule of Life**

Deacons make serious forms of commitment to the Order. Following a communally-enriching ordination retreat, deacons are ordained at a service separate from that of presbyters.<sup>24</sup> They are presented with the badge of the Order, a Celtic cross, a symbol that underlines the fact that the life and work of the Order are shaped more by the communal forms and practices of the Celtic Church than the institutionalised structures of the Roman model.<sup>25</sup>

Members of the Methodist Diaconal Order also 'make a public, lifelong commitment, renewed annually at Convocation, to following a Rule of Life and living as members of a religious community'.<sup>26</sup> The Rule of Life embraces a personal devotional discipline, which includes daily prayer for members of the Order, and a readiness to use the services of a spiritual director. The Rule involves commitment to engage in the communal gatherings of the Order, such as attendance at Convocation and area groups. However, the Order insists that its 'rule does not bind (deacons) in a way that stifles and disables, but is a means by which they might be liberated to find a sense of wholeness in the rhythm of life'. It is significant that 'there is no element of

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<sup>22</sup> J. Fowler, 'The contribution of the Methodist Diaconal Order to the ministry and mission of the future church' in D. Clark, (ed.) *Reshaping the Mission of Methodism* (Oldham: Church in the Market Place, 2010), 146.

<sup>23</sup> *Convocation Handbook*, 108-109.

<sup>24</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 5.1.

<sup>25</sup> J. Finney, *Recovering the Past – Celtic and Roman Mission* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996), 50-74.

<sup>26</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 6.2 and 27-28.

compulsion in it, but the hope that... it will become a framework for the enrichment of their own life, the life of the Order and the people of God amongst whom they live'.<sup>27</sup>

### **Mission – the medium as the message**

I have argued that the mission of the church is that of building a world of families, neighbourhoods, institutions, cities and societies that manifest the gifts of the kingdom community. I have also argued that the particular contribution of the Methodist Diaconal Order to church and world is to embody, model and give expression to those gifts through its life as a religious community. How then does the Order's exemplification of those gifts as a religious community inform and enhance its work as an order of ministry?

Because the Methodist Diaconal Order gives practical expression to the gifts of the kingdom community in the ways I have shown, deacons are socialised into the culture of that community in a way similar to that in which the young person is socialised into the culture of their family. Deacons may not always be aware of the ways in which they are making the theology of the kingdom community their own, but the communal quality of their life as a religious order speaks for itself, not least to those outside the Order.

The Methodist Diaconal Order describes itself as 'a mission-focused, pioneering religious community'.<sup>28</sup> To the church, the Order seeks to communicate what shapes its understanding of mission in both word and deed. For example, attractive booklets are regularly published which offer an overview of the Order, not least of its life as a religious community.<sup>29</sup>

However, the Order also recognizes that it is called 'to unsettle and challenge the church'.<sup>30</sup> 'Deacons... represent to the Church its calling as servant (of the kingdom community) in the world'.<sup>31</sup> Thus the Order's task is to remind 'the whole Methodist Church of its calling to be an open, welcoming community that reaches out beyond itself'.<sup>32</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Anthony Reddie can describe the Methodist Diaconal Order as 'Methodism's best kept secret' and Helen Cameron as 'yeast in the dough of Methodism'.<sup>33</sup>

The mission of the Order is also to offer the good news of the kingdom community's gifts of life, liberation, love and learning to a divided and fragmented world. The Order's 'servant ministry clearly reflects the Servant Christ whose mission involved

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<sup>27</sup> *In the Navy...*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Convocation Handbook*, 92 and 99.

<sup>29</sup> Including: *Chaplaincy*, (2004); *Voices from the Margins*, (2005); *Fresh Expressions of the Methodist Diaconal Order*, (2006); *A Way of Life*, (2007); *Dare to be a Deacon*, (2009-2010); *Who Do You Say We Are?* (2010-2011); *In the Navy...*, (2011-2012): (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order).

<sup>30</sup> *Convocation Handbook*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 4.1.

<sup>32</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 6.7.2.

<sup>33</sup> *Who Do You Say We Are?*, 6 and 15.

crossing boundaries, making connections between alienated or fragmented groups, including those beyond the margins, overturning unjust structures, standing in solidarity with the vulnerable and helping them discover their voice'.<sup>34</sup> It is in particular through their ministries 'on the margins' that deacons offer the gifts of the kingdom community to wider society.<sup>35</sup> *What is a Deacon?* comments that 'it is the self-emptying, self-offering love of Christ that reaches beyond established boundaries, cares for the most vulnerable, seeks healing, justice, liberation and restoration, and so proclaims the Good News of God's Kingdom, which is the foundation of, and template for, diaconal ministry'.<sup>36</sup>

However, their life as members of a religious community impresses on the Order that deacons, even when engaged in pioneering forms of ministry, should never become lone rangers. The ministry of deacons is an essential means of enabling and educating lay people, the church's primary resource for mission, to recognise that building the kingdom community lies at the heart of lay discipleship. *What is a Deacon?* states: 'The primary purpose in focusing diaconal ministry is to help Christians discover, develop and express their own servant ministry... and enable (them) to see God's activity in daily life and work'.<sup>37</sup> Sue Jackson, a former Warden of the Order, makes a telling point here: 'I believe we are dealing with the need for a Copernican shift in people's understanding of diaconal leadership. All of us have to move from focusing on deacons as the prime agents of diaconal ministry to lay people as the crucial servants, assisted by deacons. This is as much a matter of attitudinal change in deacons themselves as in the church generally'.<sup>38</sup>

## Challenges and Opportunities

*My contention throughout this paper has been that the unique contribution that the Methodist Diaconal Order has to make to church and world can only be made if its experience, insights and resources as a religious order remain integral to its work as an order of ministry.* Living as a religious community is not a task undertaken simply to bond and sustain the internal life of the Order. It is embraced primarily to guide, shape and empower its mission as an order of ministry. However, a number of developments over recent years threaten to disengage the Order's work as an order of ministry from its life as a religious community and thus undermine its vital contribution to the future of Methodism.

From the time that the Order re-opened, every attempt has been made to establish patterns of training matched to the distinctive gifts of those individuals who are candidating for diaconal ministry. Though this honouring of diversity has been important, it has contributed, amongst other factors, to Methodist training institutions trying to equip deacons to fulfil their role without a core curriculum specifically relating to the life and work of the Methodist Diaconal Order as a whole.

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<sup>34</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 5.7.

<sup>35</sup> *Voices from the Margins*

<sup>36</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 4.4.

<sup>37</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 5.4.

<sup>38</sup> D. Clark (ed.), *The Diaconal Church: Beyond the Mould of Christendom* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2008), 162.

A *Diaconal Students' and Probationers' Handbook* is in existence but this is not designed to take the place of a carefully planned core curriculum.<sup>39</sup> One consequence of this situation has been that the importance of the Order as a religious community, and how this should shape and empower diaconal ministry, has received far too little attention from students in training.

This lack of integration of the ministry of deacons with their membership of a religious community has continued into probation studies and pervaded the limited amount of in-service training in which deacons are involved. However, with the training of diaconal students in future likely to be focused on one Connexional training institution, there is a new opportunity for the Methodist Diaconal Order to work with that institution to forge a core curriculum which would fully recognize the importance of the Order as a religious community, and spell out the implications of this characteristic for presbyters and deacons alike.<sup>40</sup>

Though still an inspiration for many ordinands, the ordination service for deacons is now regarded as needing major revision.<sup>41</sup> One obvious omission in that service is the lack of any reference to what it means for deacons to be members of a religious order, though the presentation of the badge of the Order helps to mitigate this omission. This omission runs the risk of skewing the understanding of diaconal ordinands, and of the Methodist Church as a whole, as to what being a member of the Order is all about. Consequently, the Methodist Church, through its Faith and Order Committee, needs to work with the Order to produce a revised ordination service that takes full cognisance of the implications for Methodism of the diaconate being a religious order as well as an order of ministry.

I noted at the outset of this paper that the ministry of deacons is formally regarded as complementary to that of presbyters. There has been no space here to discuss what distinguishes a presbyter from a deacon. And unfortunately, the Methodist Conference reports addressing the questions *What is a Presbyter?* and *What is a Deacon?* go only a limited way to addressing that issue.<sup>42</sup> However, one clear difference is that *presbyters do not regard themselves as belonging to a religious order*. As things stand, therefore, deacons are wise to resist pressure to be ordained in future at the same service as presbyters as such a development could reinforce the assumption that their being a religious order is secondary to their being an order of ministry.

A number of other recent developments threaten to undermine the importance of the Order as a model, for church and world, of what it means to be a religious community. First, because the stationing of deacons and presbyters is set to become a more integrated process, the communal heart of diaconal ministry could well take

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<sup>39</sup> *Diaconal Students' and Probationers' Handbook* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> *The Fruitful Field Project* Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2012). It is likely that the Queens Foundation, Birmingham, will take on this responsibility.

<sup>41</sup> *Convocation Handbook*, 91 and 92

<sup>42</sup> See *What is a Presbyter?* Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2002) and *What is a Deacon?*, (2004).

second place to the immediate needs of Circuits, not least if the availability of presbyters becomes more uncertain. To retain the integrity of the Order, it is essential that deacons take up posts explicitly and overtly to give expression to their life as a religious community, and not just for pragmatic reasons. If discussions could take place between all involved in stationing which explored how the role of the deacon as a member of an order of ministry is shaped and empowered by being a member of a religious community, an appreciation of the value-added nature of diaconal ministry might become far clearer to those Circuits and Districts concerned.

Secondly, plans are well underway to split the pastoral oversight of deacons between two committees. It is planned that how such oversight is exercised should be determined by whether the issues concerned relate to the work of the Order as an order of ministry *or* to its life as a religious order.<sup>43</sup> The danger in this development is that the latter could become detached from the former to the detriment of an understanding of what being a deacon within British Methodism is about.

Thirdly, because the number of deacons is growing apace, district probationers' secretaries are taking over the supervision of probationer deacons as well as presbyters, relieving the Diaconal Candidates and Probationers Oversight Committee of this responsibility. Again there is a danger that, as a result, the holistic nature of diaconal formation will be compromised.

A final and potentially critical development that threatens to undermine the life and work of the Order is a drastic one-third reduction in its budget since September 2012. This reduction in funding threatens to undermine the existence of the collective form of diaconal leadership team mentioned earlier. Fortunately, a new shape to that team which retains its collective nature, and also embraces stronger links with wider Methodism, is currently being explored by a Connexional working party.<sup>44</sup>

The reduced budget for the Order, together with a similar reduction in finances for training purposes across the whole of Methodism, has resulted in the closing of the Methodist Diaconal Order's Centre in Birmingham as a residential and conference centre. This weakens an earlier evaluation of the Centre as 'the spiritual and physical focus for this dispersed religious community, and... a spiritual home'.<sup>45</sup> Nor is the survival of the Centre as such assured. A possible way to help ensure the viability of the Centre might be to use its facilities to provide a base for deacons studying at the Queens Foundation close by.

### **Methodism as a religious order**

Methodism on this side of the Atlantic stands at a crossroads. We are either witnessing what David Hempton, a highly regarded American Methodist historian calls 'the dying embers of British Methodism', or we are discerning the first faint

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<sup>43</sup> *Convocation Handbook*, 60-62.

<sup>44</sup> 'Review of the role of Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order' in *Convocation Handbook* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, 2013), 73-84.

<sup>45</sup> *What is a Deacon?*, 6.6.

signs of Methodism reborn for mission.<sup>46</sup> However, if the latter is to become a reality, some believe that *Methodism must again take on the form and nature of a religious order*. Indeed, it may well be that the consequences of Methodism all too early on losing its identity as a religious order are only becoming fully apparent a couple of centuries later.

This development would accord with those who argue that in its early years it was Methodism's communal character that enabled it to be both distinctive and dynamic.<sup>47</sup> For example, Martyn Percy, now Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, in his reflections on the contributions to *Unmasking Methodist Theology*,<sup>48</sup> writes:

It is my belief that Methodism should focus and reflect on its core strength - those gifts and charisms that gave it a strong movement identity in the first place... Methodism... as an intelligible and vibrant movement, is more like the leaven in the lump than it may ever have realized. I suspect that the future of Methodism - at least in Britain - may lie in the church saving itself from becoming too "churchy" ... So instead of trying to operate like a modernist meta-organization, Methodism may need to revisit some of its primary and generative spiritual roots. To return to being a movement, and in so doing, to renew not only itself, but also those other denominations around it that need to learn from the fusion of its dynamic evangelistic heritage and capacious social witness. To be sure, this could be a costly decision. To journey from being a movement to a church, and then back to being a movement, is not a development that many in the Conference or Marylebone Road would welcome.<sup>49</sup> But I wonder what the Wesley brothers would have had to say about it?

Where might we find a model of what Methodism might require in order to regain its historic identity? There is growing awareness that an answer to that question may be ready to hand, though it remains to be fully grasped. It is an answer that could well be embodied in carefully reflecting on where the Methodist Diaconal Order now stands, as an order of ministry *and* a religious order, and why it is growing apace. What might be discovered has been touched on throughout this paper. However, a final word needs to be added as to what matters the Methodist Diaconal Order needs to address in order to ensure that its life and work are worthy of consideration as a model for the renewal of Methodism as a religious order.

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<sup>46</sup> In an email to the author, (2006).

<sup>47</sup> *Called to Love and Praise: A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> C. Marsh, B. Beck, A. Shier-Jones, H. Wareing (eds.), *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004), 210.

<sup>49</sup> Marylebone Road is the London location of Methodist Church House, the headquarters of British Methodism.

## A Diaconal Order Renewed for Mission

What has been presented in this paper is that to which the Methodist Diaconal Order aspires and not necessarily what exists in practice. Where, therefore, might aspiration and practice need to come closer together? There are four matters that seem to need particular attention.

1. The first is the ability of the Order to reflect at depth on the communal theology which underpins its life and work. At present that theology is more implicit than explicit. There is also in some diaconal quarters a devaluing of the reflective over against the practical, and too great a readiness to allow deacons, in training and after, to shelve the former. The Order would do well to appoint a group of those with the necessary expertise to develop more fully and explicitly a theology that can inform and enriches its life as a religious order.

2. The life and membership of area groups needs serious attention. Because some groups operate very effectively and others very inadequately, the Order should continue research into what produces such a disparity. Many believe that much could be gained from clearer oversight from the leadership team in relation to a programme of reading and discussion for all groups.<sup>50</sup> Such an annual course of theological reflection offered to groups might help to give a greater sense of the Order being a learning community. Insights, if shared, possibly at Convocation, could be informative and even inspirational. All this would bring a stronger sense of the Order being on a shared journey of spiritual discovery, especially if supported by carefully elected and trained area group leaders.

3. There is a pressing need for the designing of a core curriculum for the training of all student deacons.<sup>51</sup> This needs to make explicit the theological and ecclesiological foundations on which the Order is built.<sup>52</sup> Far from a core curriculum negating diversity of practice, it would bring much needed coherence and a sense of common purpose to the Order.

4. Convocation should reflect further on what it means to be a participatory and democratic Order. This development would be enhanced if more time and attention were given to facilitating the contribution of the members of the Order present at Convocation. Their experience and insights are invaluable and need to be more widely shared with colleagues. The participatory format of the Convocation of 2012, when issues concerning the reshaping of the Order were very much to the fore, remains a good model for what needs to become the norm.

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<sup>50</sup> As indicated in the discussions at the Methodist Diaconal Convocation, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> As noted in the draft curriculum for the training of deacons drawn up a few years ago - *The Formation and Training of Deacons* (Birmingham, Methodist Diaconal Order, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> It is of interest to note that recently it has been recommended that consideration of these foundations be referred for consideration to the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church. See 'Review of the role of Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order' in the *Convocation Handbook* (Birmingham: Methodist Diaconal Order, 2013), 73-84.

## The Wider Significance of the Methodist Diaconal Order

There is recurring evidence that because the Methodist Diaconal Order is a religious order, the wider ecumenical community sees it as able to contribute something of major importance to a renewed diaconate across *all* churches.<sup>53</sup> One reason for this affirmation of the Order is that diaconal associations related to other denominations are also striving to find ways of preventing the growth in new forms of ministry (priestly, lay and diaconal) obscuring what should be distinctive about the permanent diaconate as a model of a servant church: making manifest for church *and* world the gifts of the kingdom community.

The witness of the Methodist Diaconal Order is that its distinctiveness does not lie primarily in its being an order of ministry, that is, in the diversity of ministries in which deacons are involved. All ministries in which deacons engage are equally valid for the whole people of God. *What the Methodist Diaconal Order offers to Methodism, and to the wider church, is a means by which ministry and mission can be theologically and spiritually reshaped, enriched and empowered by embracing the model of a religious community that exemplifies, and enables others to exemplify, the gifts of the kingdom community.*

[www.theologyandministry.org](http://www.theologyandministry.org)

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<sup>53</sup> *Who Do You Say We Are?*, 8, 12; *Convocation Handbook*, (2011), 96.



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