

33. The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate - Interim Report

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Status of paper	Final
Resolutions	<p>33/1. The Conference receives the Report.</p> <p>33/2. The Conference directs the Methodist Council, with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, to consider whether the religious order should be opened to receive into membership Methodists who are lay or ordained to presbyteral ministry and report to the 2018 Conference.</p> <p>33/3. The Conference directs the Methodist Council, with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, to consider whether those whom it ordains to the diaconal order of ministry continue to be required also to become members of the religious order and report to the 2018 Conference.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aims	This is an interim report exploring the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate in the Methodist Church in Britain. It outlines areas for further exploration by the Faith and Order Committee with the MDO and identifies two key questions for the Methodist Church to consider.
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • The diaconate in the universal Church • The diaconate in the Methodist Church in Britain • Ordained diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain • The Methodist Diaconal Order as a religious order • Conclusion and further work
Background documents	<p><i>The Methodist Diaconal Order (1993) in Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, Volume Two, 1984-2000 Part One, pp 291-314.</i></p> <p>www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Faith_and_Order_Statements_Vol2_Part1_0409.pdf</p>
Consultations	The Methodist Diaconal Order

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Methodist Church in Britain understands itself to be part of the whole Church of Christ.¹ In the changing context of the twenty-first century it continues to live out its calling in the world, and to offer its distinctive contribution to the wider Church. In common with other churches, presbyters and deacons in the Methodist Church are ordained to the presbyterate and the diaconate in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.²
- 1.2 The role of the deacon (and deaconess) and their relationship to the Methodist Church, the ways in which diaconal ministry has been expressed, and the nature and place of the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO) within the Methodist Church in Britain, have evolved over time as the Church has sought to discern the will of God and remain faithful to its calling. The MDO, like the Wesley Deaconess Order before it, is a gift of God to the Church to help enable the Church to fulfil its calling; and God has brought many blessings through the ministry of Methodist deacons and deaconesses across the years. The story of the MDO reveals how both the Church and the Order have sought to respond to the changing needs of the Church and the world. It is a story of pilgrimage; of seeking to respond to God's call to participate in the servant ministry of Christ.³ In its present form, the MDO is a "response to the call of God in our contemporary context".⁴
- 1.3 Within the universal Church, deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain are currently in the distinctive position of belonging to both an order of ministry and a religious order. Within ecumenical conversations and as the MDO has evolved and the Church's understanding of the diaconate has developed, the Methodist Church in Britain has been challenged to reflect on how it understands and undertakes its diaconal ministry, and how that ministry is focused in those it sets apart as deacons through ordination. In a 2013 report to the Methodist Council, the working party appointed to review the role of the Warden of the MDO said that the MDO "represents a distinctive approach to the role and identity of deacons and the diaconate, significantly different from the role and identity associated with that title in other churches both in Britain and worldwide".⁵ This distinctive approach was found to be a source of joy and pride, whilst also bringing many challenges. The 2013 Conference agreed with the Council's conclusions that the time was ripe for renewed work to be done on the theological and ecclesiological issues raised by the distinctive model that the British Methodist Church has adopted, and it directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the MDO, to "undertake work on the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate in Methodism, its place within the British Connexion and its place within the universal Church".⁶ The work was welcomed by the MDO, some members of which had long been arguing for such work to take place.

¹ *Called to Love and Praise (CLP)*, 1999, 4.1.1.

² *Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p.298

³ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.2

⁴ *Methodist Council Report*, 2013, 11.3

⁵ Methodist Council Paper MC/13/13 *Review of the Role of the Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order*

⁶ 2013 Conference Resolution 44/11

- 1.4 This work was also prompted by a number of experiences requiring theological investigation, two examples of which are issues around stationing and questions of oversight:
- 1.4.1 Recruitment to the MDO in recent years has flourished as increasing numbers of Methodist people have experienced a call to ordained diaconal ministry and a call to belong to the religious order, but this has been accompanied by various challenges in the stationing of deacons: in some years there have not been enough appointments for deacons at the beginning of the stationing process; some deacons have found themselves in “presbyteral appointments” or appointments that are not entirely appropriate in some other way; and within many Circuits there is an acknowledged and persisting lack of awareness and understanding of the nature of the ministry of deacons. These experiences raise questions about how Methodists understand diaconal ministry (particularly as focused by those it ordains deacons), and highlight theological and ecclesiological questions that are relevant to the whole Church.
- 1.4.2 There continues to be some complexity and ambiguity in how deacons and the MDO relate to the Conference, the presbyterate and local Circuits, and these are often manifested in confusion, or tension, around patterns and structures of oversight. The persisting questions about the role of the Warden in relation to various oversight structures provide one example of this.
- 1.4.3 In addition, there are other factors raising similar questions: the growth and changes in patterns and types of ministry has also prompted discussion about the nature of diaconal ministry and its relationship to different ministries in the Methodist Church in Britain, not least through the development of pioneer ministry and the variety of paid lay workers; continuing issues relating to requests for deacons to be given authorisations to preside at Holy Communion; ongoing work exploring the liturgical role of deacons⁷; and discrepancies between polity, practice and the language employed.
- 1.5 In undertaking this work, the Faith and Order Committee has taken the view that the 1993 report, *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, provides the Methodist Church’s working theology for its understanding of the diaconate. *What is a Deacon?* (2004) is an important report and has proved influential. It details some developments since 1993 and provides some helpful insights into diaconal ministry and the MDO, as understood and experienced at the time; but some of the concepts and thinking underlying that report have now been critiqued or superseded and the MDO’s self-understanding has moved on. The theology articulated in the 1993 report therefore forms the foundation for reflection on the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate.
- 1.6 The Faith and Order Committee has reflected on insights from biblical, historical and theological scholarship, ecumenical developments, Methodist practice, and the experiences of members of the MDO. Various consultations with the MDO have taken place as the work has progressed: initially at the Convocation in 2014, and then through specially convened meetings of the Diaconal Regional Groups during the autumn of 2015. Some individual members of the MDO have also submitted reflections on and responses to the work.

⁷ Resolution 35/4 of the 2012 Conference.

- 1.7 This report therefore sets out some biblical and historical understandings of the diaconate within the universal Church, reviews recent ecumenical developments and conversations, offers an account of the story of the MDO and the diaconate within the British Methodist Church, and reflects on current experience. It provides some foundational thinking for a British Methodist theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate, offers some consideration of the Methodist Church's understanding of the diaconate as an order of ministry and as a religious order, and indicates the further areas and questions that need to be addressed. It is presented to the Conference as an interim report, for the reasons given in section six.

2 The Diaconate in the Universal Church

- 2.1 The Methodist Conference has affirmed that: "the Methodist Diaconal Order is both an order of ministry and a religious order, in which the servant ministry of Christ to the world is focused and represented."⁸ Those who are received into full membership of the MDO are ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God⁹, and part of the purpose of this current piece of work is to articulate how the Methodist Church in Britain understands its ordained deacons to be part of the diaconate in the universal Church.

- 2.2 This section of the report builds upon the theological foundation set out in *The Methodist Diaconal Order* (1993). Taking account of theological developments, new scholarship and differences in practice, it highlights some of the significant developments during the past two decades. The section therefore broadly follows the structure of the relevant sections of the 1993 report and acknowledges points of particular relevance, but it does not seek to repeat all of the foundational thinking previously set out. It is therefore intended that the relevant sections of the 1993 report and this report shall be read alongside each other.

2.3 The New Testament and "Deacons"

The history of the diaconate from the New Testament onwards is complex¹⁰, and it is not possible comprehensively to explore biblical, historical and contemporary understandings of the diaconate in a report such as this. Yet it is important to offer some account in order to provide a theological and ecclesiological framework for a British Methodist understanding.¹¹

- 2.3.1 The New Testament evidence of patterns of ministry is partial and limited, suggesting that responses were shaped by local experience, perceived needs and contextual influences.¹² The process of responding to God's call to participate in the servant ministry of Christ begins a pattern seen throughout church history: "The Holy Spirit prompts and empowers a body of Christians to respond to a need in society. The particular shape service takes is then determined both by the Spirit and the concrete situation."¹³ Some reflection on the patterns and nature of ministry in the New Testament is nonetheless helpful.

⁸ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.21

⁹ A Resolution adopted by the 1988 Conference

¹⁰ A point made in *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 1.7.

¹¹ Some reflections on the New Testament and deacons can be found in section 2 of *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993.

¹² *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 2.7; *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.3.

¹³ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.2.

- 2.3.2 Christ appointed a group of twelve apostles “to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mark 3:13-19). The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:15-26) records that the first action of the fledgling Church was prayerfully to replace Judas, who with the remaining eleven had been “allotted his share in this ministry”, the word for “ministry” being *diakonia* here and almost always where that word appears in English New Testaments. The Church’s leadership and ministry thus initially consisted of the twelve apostles.
- 2.3.3 The Acts of the Apostles also contains reports of the preaching and evangelistic or apologetic work of two others: Stephen and Philip. These had been among seven assistants appointed through prayer and the laying on of hands by the apostles in consultation with the whole Church (Acts 6:1-6). Many would consider these seven to be the Church’s first deacons, but they are not named as such.¹⁴ Whilst the ministry exercised by the twelve and the task of the seven appear to be a distinction between ministers of the word and a caring ministry, the only further accounts regarding the seven concern two of them (Stephen and Philip) who had clear gifts of preaching and evangelism. It has alternatively been suggested that what we see in Acts 6 is not so much a distinction between a ministry of the word and a ministry of caring as a distinction between those who exercised a wide outreach ministry (initially the apostles) and a team responsible for a more local ministry. In the generation following the apostles, people like Timothy and Titus appear to have exercised a similar travelling ministry, and by the second century the pattern of bishops responsible for a town and its hinterland was becoming established.
- 2.3.4 The New Testament contains few references to “deacons” in any way that might be thinking of them as office-holders, and these references give us little information about the nature of the role and the functions that were performed.¹⁵ It is therefore difficult to draw direct parallels between those identified as deacons in the New Testament and deacons who belong to a specific order of ministry that has developed in the course of church history.
- 2.3.5 In the past quarter of a century, the work of John Collins¹⁶ has been influential in biblical studies and ecumenical conversations about the diaconate. Collins engages with the New Testament texts primarily through a study of the *diakon-* word group. The diversity of usage of this word group in the New Testament is considerable, and usually translated “serve/servant” or “ministry/minister”. Before Collins published his research, and despite the widely diverse functions of deacons and deaconesses in church history, as will be outlined in the next section, there was a widespread assumption that the *diakon-* word group referred generally to the offering of humble service or works of mercy.¹⁷ Collins’ study challenged the long-standing equation of *diakonia* with service, and recovered an understanding of *diakonos* as “commissioned agent”.
- 2.3.6 Having established that the key concept inherent in Greek literature from before and around the New Testament period is that of deacon as a “go-between”, Collins examines the New Testament uses of the word group concluding that a meaning

¹⁴ See paragraph 2.6 of *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993.

¹⁵ See paragraphs 2.2-2.5 of *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993.

¹⁶ John N Collins, *Diakonia – Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

¹⁷ See for example, the entry in the influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and others (English translations 1964 onwards).

along the lines of “spokesperson” best does justice to all the evidence. In some cases there is a more particular reference to carrying out a commission for a church, but he does not find evidence of a specific role of deacon, concurring with the view that practice was varied and fluid. In particular he admits that where the word is used within the gospels, “waiting at tables” or serving more generally is a natural interpretation. However, what is common to all uses of *diakon-* is that action is always performed as a fulfilment of responsibility towards the one who authorises the action. Collins’ approach therefore shifts the emphasis from what is done to the commissioned nature of the activity.

2.3.7 Whilst many have endorsed Collins’ work and it has been influential during the last quarter of a century, his approach and conclusions have also been critiqued. His view that service is the duty of all Christians may not be controversial, but his shift away from an understanding of service as the essence of diaconal ministry has been contentious, particularly in the light of the way in which the diaconate has developed and been understood throughout the Church’s history. Although Collins argues that *diakonia* as a commissioned activity is reserved for ordained deacons, many have taken issue with his exegesis, pointing to other material (for example, Ephesians 4:7-13, 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, and Romans 12:4-8) that broadens further our understanding of the ways in which the word *diakonia* is used in Scripture and demonstrates that it by no means refers only to people engaging in some sort of leadership.

2.3.8 The most important lasting contribution of Collins is the understanding that diaconal ministry is not so much focused on caring for people, vital though that is to our discipleship, so much as fulfilling a commission, whether for the Church or for God. The study of the *diakon-* word group offers some helpful insights and the desire to interpret the New Testament not simply by assuming a basic meaning of a word but by examining its uses in context, and with a full understanding of its contemporary background, is something to be welcomed; yet it is also arguable whether this is the most appropriate mechanism for determining a theological underpinning for the diaconate. Generally a similar approach is not taken for presbyter (older man) or episcopos (financial officer/overseer). Rather than the term creating the order, the term has been adopted to describe a sense of specific calling within the overall calling of the Church.

2.3.9 Some reasonable conclusions from studying the New Testament towards our understanding of the diaconate would therefore seem to be:

- (1) That diaconal ministry, itself a tautology since it is a phrase deploying the same biblical word as adjective and noun, is not something that narrowly defines a particular role in the life of the primitive church. It is the business of every Christian, and also, in particular, of any person holding a responsibility in leadership.
- (2) That in New Testament church life, describing a person as a deacon, or their role as diaconal, would likely convey the idea that they were carrying out a commission on behalf of another, usually assumed to be God, even where not expressly stated. Laying on of hands in the New Testament is usually practised in relation to healing or prayer for the Holy Spirit where it signifies God’s touch. The same can therefore reasonably be assumed where it is used in the Acts (6:6) in connection with prayer for the seven “deacons” and God’s gifting for ministry is explicitly seen as linked to

that sign in 2 Timothy 1:6 (see also 1 Timothy 4:14).

- (3) That leadership patterns were evolving in the church of the New Testament without achieving anything like consistency from place to place by the end of the apostolic period.
- (4) That as part of this process, “deacon” seems to have begun to be used to describe a particular office within the *diakonia* of the whole local church. Or at least this happened in some local churches, with women and men fulfilling the role. It is highly likely that the roles the office was understood to entail were not the same in every place which had deacons. That said, preaching and evangelism as well as acts of caring service would appear to be among the activities that at least some deacons engaged in.

2.4 The Historical Development of the Diaconate

- 2.4.1 *The Methodist Diaconal Order* (1993) contains a brief review of the development of the diaconate in the early church, and in the Medieval West through the Reformation to nineteenth-century Protestantism.¹⁸ This still provides a reasonable summary of the history of diaconal ministry in the western tradition from the patristic period onwards. The following points are of particular note.
- 2.4.2 The various ministries noted in the New Testament gradually became more distinct, with the threefold office of bishop, presbyter and deacon becoming more fixed by the beginning of the second century. In the early Christian communities the relationship between these offices was unclear.
- 2.4.3 It is generally agreed that both women and men were deacons in the early centuries.
- 2.4.4 Deacons performed a variety of roles. They were by no means confined to “works of mercy” and often had considerable responsibility as the assistants to bishops, with bishops using the skills of deacons in a wide variety of ways. It is important to note, though, that the deacon was regarded as the servant of the *Church*, rather than of the bishop.¹⁹ This assisting role has been expressed and fulfilled by deacons in different ways. In the early church, deacons soon took a part in the Eucharist, particularly in distributing the bread and wine to those present and to the absent: their involvement in the liturgy expressing a servant ministry for the spiritual and physical nourishment of the Church. “This linking of the spiritual and material becomes a hallmark of the deacon’s work in the early Church.”²⁰ The liturgical role of deacons, and their role and responsibility with regards to organisation and administration (particularly of pastoral care), has sometimes been more prominent than practical engagement in social care or evangelistic activities, and they have also had a role in helping bishops in teaching the faith.
- 2.4.5 From the fourth century onwards the diaconate generally declined as a permanent ministry, becoming for the most part a transitional state on the way to priestly

¹⁸ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, sections 3, 4, 5 and 6.

¹⁹ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 3.2.

²⁰ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 3.3.

ordination. There were exceptions, but these were genuinely exceptional.

- 2.4.6 During the Reformation, Calvin gave the diaconate a distinctive place as a permanent office and he set out a twofold diaconate: “administrators” and “nurses”, both focused on social welfare and neither particularly taking a liturgical role. But by the nineteenth century the purpose and effectiveness of the diaconate as Calvin had envisaged it diminished.²¹
- 2.4.7 Yet in the nineteenth century there was a revival of the diaconate in the form of deaconess orders, significantly focused on meeting the needs of the urban poor. This renewal was widespread, geographically and denominationally.
- 2.4.8 Today, most churches have a ministry of deacons, but the form that the diaconate takes varies widely.²² For example²³, in the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions the diaconate is the first of three orders of deacon, priest and bishop, and a step towards ordination to the presbyterate. The Roman Catholic Church also has permanent deacons whose ministry is one of service, primarily working in parishes to facilitate lay ministry through identifying areas of need and training the laity to undertake the specific ministry. The Church of England has a number of distinctive deacons who do not go on to ordination in the presbyterate. Whilst in many churches transitional deacons continue to be the norm, some, such as the Uniting Church in Australia, the Church of Sweden and the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and Americas, ordain permanent deacons. In the Orthodox tradition, the deacon’s role as a liturgical assistant forms a significant part of the ministry, whilst the Protestant churches have a tradition of deacons as pastoral workers in social and health care and education. Some churches have a different understanding of deacons, who are lay leaders appointed to a particular office in the local church. Such deacons have sometimes had a role in helping the ordained minister, and sometimes have collective responsibility for leadership (and perhaps management). In Baptist churches deacons are appointed for a specific period of time to work with others in taking responsibility for the day to day management and administration of the Church. In the United Reformed Church lay Church Related Community Workers exercise many diaconal functions.

2.5 **Ecumenical Developments**

- 2.5.1 The 2004 Conference report *What is a Deacon?* commented on the widespread development of the diaconate throughout the world in recent years that has provoked a renewed interest in the theology of diaconal ministry.²⁴ The associated examination of the role of a deacon in different denominations has led to a new appreciation of the variety of diaconal roles in different churches.²⁵ In this report it was felt that it is more fruitful to look at developments in ecumenical conversations regarding the diaconate, rather than at specific developments in particular churches.

²¹ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 6.1.

²² Avis, P. (2013) “The Diaconate: a flagship ministry?” *Theology and Ministry 2*, St John’s College, Durham, pp.1-14.

²³ For a brief description of different understandings and expressions of the ministry of deacons see section 9 of *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993.

²⁴ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.1.

²⁵ AMICUM report, 2014, 74.

2.5.2 Despite differences in “the ecclesiological position of deacons and the relative emphasis given to different aspects of their ministry”, *What is a Deacon?* concluded that there was “broad ecumenical agreement on the nature of diaconal ministry.”²⁶ The report drew attention to the World Council of Churches’ definition of diaconal ministry which has received broad endorsement:

“Deacons represent to the church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in Church life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of congregations: for example, by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfil certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance.”²⁷

2.5.3 Subsequent ecumenical dialogues confirm both the convergence around understandings of *diakonia* as well as the divergence in understandings of the diaconate.²⁸ For example, conversations exploring the diaconate in the Church of England and the Methodist Church in Britain found convergence “as deacons from each tradition shared their strength of conviction about their specific calling and the blessings that come from their activities” and “also an acceptance that each tradition had a distinct understanding of the relationship of diaconal roles to other ordained ministries, which led to a sense of divergence.”²⁹ It has been widely acknowledged that Anglican, Methodist and other churches have interpreted the threefold pattern of ordained ministry (of bishop, presbyter and deacon) in different ways,³⁰ and different ecumenical conversations have struggled to discern what kind of agreements might be reached regarding the interchangeability of diaconal ministry.³¹

2.5.4 *Diakonia* is profoundly contextual.³² Consequently, the form of the diaconate or diaconal ministry will be specific to the particular context of the church. *The Jerusalem Report*, which emerged from Anglican-Lutheran consultations, explored *diakonia* as an expression of *koinonia*, communion with and in Christ, and highlighted “the essential place of *diakonia* as a bridge, holding worship and witness together in a faithful response to God’s mission.”³³ Instead of attempting to address issues of interchangeability, it is argued in the *Jerusalem Report* that the “unity expressed through *diakonia* will emerge through the development of the form of ministry needed to respond to particular needs, rather than in any attempt to come to a uniform understanding of the diaconate.”³⁴ In various conversations, for example, deacons have found significant convergence at an experiential level

²⁶ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.1.

²⁷ World Council of Churches, 1982. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Geneva: WCC, M31, p.27.

²⁸ For example, “To Love and Serve the Lord: *Diakonia* in the Life of the Church”, *The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission (ALIC III)*, 2012, p.35.

²⁹ Joint Implementation Commission. *Moving Forward in Covenant*. 2011. Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 1.

³⁰ Such as in the report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission (AMICUM), 2014, *Into All the World*. London: Anglican Consultative Council.

³¹ See, for example, *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.35; *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate.

³² *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.36.

³³ *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, pp.7-8.

³⁴ *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.37

focusing on a renewed missiological understanding of a deacon's role.³⁵

2.5.5 In ecumenical dialogues about *diakonia*, service, witness and worship are recognised to be deeply related. The *Jerusalem Report* affirms "that worship (*leitourgia*), service (*diakonia*) and witness (*martyria*) belong together."³⁶ In conversations with the Church of England, the Methodist Church in Britain has been challenged to continue exploring its theological understanding of the relationship of diaconal ministry to the ministry of the word and to worship, and to ensure that this relationship is embodied in the ministry of Methodist deacons.³⁷ This is a significant challenge requiring further attention (see paragraphs 4.9.1 and 4.9.3 below).

2.5.6 In the past few decades *diakonia* has been reclaimed as a mark of the whole Church.³⁸ The World Council of Churches' convergence document, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, affirms that *diakonia* "belongs to the very being of the Church".³⁹ It is the work of all Christian people and cannot be reduced to the activity of those whom the Church sets apart as deacons.⁴⁰ For example, the "distinctive diaconate" in some Anglican provinces and dioceses serves as "a sign to the whole Church of its permanent calling."⁴¹ Through its participation in *diakonia* the Church learns more fully what it is to follow Christ. *Diakonia* is not just about transforming the world but about being transformed, and there is a need to explore how the Church is changed by the ministry of deacons.⁴²

2.5.7 In some recent ecumenical conversations deacons have described aspects of *diakonia* as prophetic, referring to acts of compassionate care, advocacy, empowering action and exposing and challenging structural injustice.⁴³ In the conversations between the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England, reflection on the prophetic elements of the deacon's role arose in the context of discussions about leadership. Leadership was described as: "an expression of servant leadership, modelled on Christ", "shown in service which points to God and heralds good news", "task-orientated" and service "offered as a directed and intentional choice rather than merely a way of responding to another's directive as a subordinate."⁴⁴ Such leadership can be exercised "middle-in" within the institution of the Church (rather than "top-down" or "bottom-up").⁴⁵ There is scope for further reflection on what it means for an ordained minister in the Methodist Church to share in the prophetic office of Christ.

³⁵ As noted by Paul Avis, (2013) "The Diaconate: a flagship ministry?" *Theology and Ministry 2*, St. John's College, Durham, pp.1-14, reflecting on conversations as part of *The Hanover Report: The Diaconate as an Ecumenical Opportunity* (1996), the *Porvoo Agreement* (1996), and *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate.

³⁶ *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.7.

³⁷ *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 22.

³⁸ AMICUM report, 2014, 74.

³⁹ *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, 2013, 58.

⁴⁰ *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 2.

⁴¹ AMICUM report, 2014, 74; *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.10.

⁴² *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 22.

⁴³ *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.8; *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate.

⁴⁴ *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 4.

⁴⁵ *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 4

2.5.8 Further commonalities have emerged within the practice of deacons in different churches. The *What is a Deacon?* report further referred to a UK Ecumenical Diaconal Consultation in 1997,⁴⁶ noting a converging vision for diaconal ministry as “Christ-focused, people-centred and lived out in a lifestyle both active and contemplative ...”⁴⁷ It revealed how deacons increasingly understood themselves as engaging in a pioneering role, finding themselves “spanning boundaries”, acting as an “agent of change” and encouraging others to take risks”.⁴⁸ Diaconal ministry is also expressed through the building of communities of “healing, feeding and hospitality.”⁴⁹ Such ministry helps energise communities to move forward by reminding them that they are loved by a God who is greater than any destructive forces and by pointing to God’s saving action in their prior history.⁵⁰

2.5.9 In 2003 the Church of England and the Methodist Church in Britain entered into a covenantal relationship based on interdependent Acknowledgements and Commitments. These included a commitment to work to overcome the remaining obstacles to the organic unity of the two churches, on the way to the full visible unity of Christ’s Church. Joint reflection on the nature and practice of diaconal ministry and the role of the ordained deacon has since taken place through the work of the Joint Implementation Commission⁵¹ and through shared conversations and consultations.⁵² In 2014 the Methodist Conference and the General Synod of the Church of England directed the faith and order bodies of both churches to work together to bring proposals to address the question of reconciling, with integrity, the existing presbyteral and diaconal ministries of the two Churches, which would lead to the interchangeability of ministries.⁵³

3 The Diaconate in the Methodist Church in Britain

3.1 As previously documented,⁵⁴ the MDO has its roots in the Wesley Deaconess Order which was the result of the merger, in 1935, of the three Orders (the Wesleyan Order, the Free Methodist Church Order and those appointed as Sisters in the Primitive Methodist Church). The 1936 *Book of Offices* included a service for “The Ordination of Deaconesses” and the 1942 Conference adopted various resolutions in order to improve the connexional status of members of the Order. In the following thirty years the work of the Wesley Deaconesses became more varied and the 1993 report noted that: “For many years the deaconesses had worked in the large city missions and their main tasks were visiting, leading class meetings and much large social work with the poor in the community” but by 1956 “half of the deaconesses were working on housing estates, in rural areas, circuit churches, with Home

⁴⁶ The Church of Scotland, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, the Methodist Church in Britain, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England were represented at the meeting. Conversations also included Church Related Community Workers from the United Reformed Church and an Orthodox deacon in training.

⁴⁷ *The Windsor Statement on the Diaconate*, 1997. Produced at the MDO Centre, 26 St James Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham.

⁴⁸ *The Windsor Statement on the Diaconate*, 1997.

⁴⁹ *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.13

⁵⁰ *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.12.

⁵¹ *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011

⁵² For example, the joint conversations in Birmingham in 2010. Some report of this is made in *Moving Forward in Covenant* 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 17.

⁵³ Joint Implementation Commission, *The Challenge of the Covenant: Uniting in Mission and Holiness*, 2014 Conference Report.

⁵⁴ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, sections 6 and 7.

Mission caravans, in youth work, in Chaplaincy, in welfare work and overseas with the Methodist Missionary Society".⁵⁵ The 1965 Convocation agreed that ordination to the office and work of a deaconess was for life.

- 3.2 In 1973 the Conference decided to open the presbyteral ministry to women, and this had some impact on the Order. Diaconal ministry was also increasingly becoming church-based, and different forms of social work were being understood as ways of expressing a Christian ministry of service. As the number of candidates offering for diaconal ministry declined, the 1978 Conference decided that recruitment to the Order should cease; although the Order remained active.
- 3.3 In the years that followed, further attention was given to the ministry of the whole people of God and patterns of ministry within the Methodist Church. In 1986 the Conference agreed to re-open the Wesley Deaconess Order to men and women, and twelve candidates for training were accepted the following year. Three factors, "ordination, life-long commitment and availability for stationing" indicated a parallel to ordained (presbyteral) ministry,⁵⁶ but there was some debate about whether deacons and deaconesses could be "ordained and lay".⁵⁷ The 1988 Conference resolved to rename the Order the Methodist Diaconal Order and agreed "that the members of the Methodist Diaconal Order who are received into full membership of the Order shall be ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God." It was acknowledged that this decision raised "far-reaching theological and constitutional issues" that remained to be resolved.⁵⁸ The Conference directed that further work be undertaken to explore these consequences, and the 1993 report, *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, contains some of the results of that thinking.
- 3.4 Various issues were explored including, for example, questions about what is distinctive about the ministry of deacons and how diaconal and lay ministry relate; the nature of the MDO (which displayed characteristics of a religious order); whether the office of deacon was lay or ordained; and issues of accountability, for example how the Convocation relates to the Conference.
- 3.5 The 1993 Conference took the significant step of affirming that the Methodist Church recognises and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal.⁵⁹ It was argued that there is reason to believe that MDO is both an order of ministry and a religious order "in which the servant ministry of Christ to the world is focused and represented."⁶⁰ The report highlighted the following statement about the nature of ordained diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain:

"Deacons and deaconesses are a 'focus' for the servant ministry of Christ; through their ministry of caring, the incarnate servant Christ is revealed. They are a 'focus' for the servant ministry of the Church, making visible God's calling to the Church to be a servant in the world. Their servant ministry challenges the Church to respond to this calling. Part of their role is to interpret to the Church the needs and aspirations of the world. Deacons and deaconesses offer Methodism and the wider Church the discipline, spirituality and commitment to community that is part of

⁵⁵ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 7.5

⁵⁶ *The Ministry of the People of God*, 1988, *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, Volume Two 1984-2000, Part One, p.255

⁵⁷ A point noted in Walters, C, 1996, *Epworth Review*.

⁵⁸ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 8.5

⁵⁹ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, Recommendation 1.

⁶⁰ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.21; 12.1

working out their personal vocation in the context of being a religious order.”⁶¹

- 3.6 It quickly became apparent that the adoption by the Conference of the 1993 report prompted a variety of further (and continuing) theological and constitutional questions. These included, for example, questions about: deacons serving in the Vice-Presidency (and what this says about the nature of the office, if open to lay and those ordained as deacons), parity when working with probationers (at the time the oversight processes were different), who appoints the Warden, the status of deacons as local preachers, how the two orders of ministry related, and whether deacons were members of the (then) Ministerial Session of the Conference. These questions were fundamentally about the identity of deacons who belonged to both a religious order and an order of ministry, and therefore the different ways in which they were accountable to and under the discipline of the Conference. Concerns to protect the MDO’s identity as a religious order, alongside a recognition that further work was needed to ensure that both the Church and deacons understood what it meant for the diaconate to be an order of ministry, meant that reflection was focused on the nature of the diaconate as an order of ministry, rather than exploring further what it meant to for the MDO be a religious order. *The Diaconate* (1997) clarified a variety of matters relating to the relationship of deacons to the Conference, Circuits and presbyters, and particularly that all deacons should be received into Full Connexion.⁶² In recognition of this, a year later the Conference received all deacons into Full Connexion, thus repeating its conviction that the diaconate is an order of ministry in the Methodist Church.
- 3.7 As the Faith and Order Committee began to examine the issues challenging the Church today (as indicated in paragraph 1.4) and to explore how the MDO and the ministry of deacons has developed during the last twenty years, it became clear that three questions persisted, namely:
- (1) What is the Methodist Church in Britain’s understanding of the diaconate as an order of ministry?
 - (2) What is the Methodist Church in Britain’s understanding of the diaconate as a religious order?
 - (3) What is the relationship between the order of ministry and the religious order?
- 3.8 These are questions that are fundamental to the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate in the Methodist Church in Britain, and they formed the basis of the consultations with the diaconal Regional Groups. The questions were not unfamiliar to members of the MDO, and there was a sense of frustration that the MDO, and the Church, are repeatedly reflecting on them: and yet the fact of their persistence illustrates that previous discussions have addressed them only in part. It became evident that other issues could only be adequately responded to once there is a clearer and shared understanding on these three key points.
- 3.9 As this work has progressed, it has been clear that there is diversity in experiences, understandings and narratives about diaconal ministry and the nature of the MDO, both within the Methodist Church in Britain and within the MDO itself. In part this reflects the contextual and pragmatic nature of the ministry of deacons. In part this emerges from the story of an Order that has developed and changed over time. For example, there are differences in experiences and understandings between those who had been members of the Wesley Deaconess Order, those who became deacons soon after recruitment to the

⁶¹ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.12

⁶² *The Diaconate*, 1997, 4.8.

Order re-opened, and those who had trained within the last ten years.

- 3.10 It also demonstrates the need for a more clearly articulated and shared understanding of diaconal ministry within the MDO and the wider Methodist Church. Within the consultation it was acknowledged that in some Circuits the understanding of diaconal ministry is limited or dependent upon experiences of the ministry of a particular deacon. Although deacons demonstrated a strong sense of communal diaconal identity, there was much diversity in their responses to a question about the distinctive nature of diaconal ministry.⁶³ The Methodist Church has concluded that a purely functional view of diaconal ministry is unsatisfactory and acknowledged that it is “not immediately obvious what is distinctive about diaconal ministry”⁶⁴, but if deacons are a focus for the servant ministry of Christ (as articulated in paragraph 3.5 above) then some shared understanding of the nature of that ministry is vital.
- 3.11 Many Methodist deacons understand ordained diaconal ministry to require a willingness to serve as needed and directed by the Church, as expressed through direct stationing and itinerancy. Such deacons understand themselves as servants of the Church, sometimes undertaking appointments that could not immediately be identified as “diaconal” or that were not perceived as fruitful for the individual, but were where they felt the Church needed them to be at that particular time. It was felt that ordained diaconal ministry requires a level of flexibility, adaptability and willingness to learn new skills as needed in the particular context, because service may be expressed in a variety of ways and in a diversity of contexts from one appointment to the next.
- 3.12 For many British Methodist deacons, belonging to an order of ministry and a religious order is “completely intertwined” as the Methodist Church has stated⁶⁵, and which was clearly articulated within the recent consultations; however, the experience of some deacons is that their primary calling is to be a member of a religious order and for them the practice of diaconal ministry is secondary, whilst others feel that their call to the order of ministry takes precedence. Of these, some found it difficult to accept the aspect of the order that they were not initially called to, whilst others grew in their understanding and appreciation of it. This was not so obvious in relation to those who had become members of the MDO in the last decade who tended to assert more strongly that the order of ministry and religious order could not be distinguished.
- 3.13 As has been noted in paragraph 2.3.9 (1), diaconal ministry is the call of all disciples, and is undertaken by all members of the Methodist Church, lay and ordained. In the changing contemporary context, the Methodist Church in Britain continues to seek to discern the will of God and to reflect on how it understands and undertakes its diaconal ministry. It is challenged to reflect on how this ministry might be expressed in those whom it sets apart through ordination for the purpose of focusing and representing this servant ministry, and it is reminded that “the entire Church must be diaconal in character if it is to serve as a sign of Christ.”⁶⁶ The ministry of Methodist deacons is a means of enabling and enriching the ministry of the whole people of God.⁶⁷ It is the task of this report to help the Church reflect

⁶³ At Convocation in 2014, deacons were asked “what are the distinctive contributions that deacons have to offer?”

⁶⁴ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.4.

⁶⁵ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 3.5.

⁶⁶ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.13.

⁶⁷ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.13

on what God is calling those who focus and represent diaconal ministry to at this time.

4 Ordained Diaconal Ministry in the Methodist Church

- 4.1 All ministry derives from the ministry of Christ. Methodism holds that the ordained are set apart by the Church as a perpetual reminder of the calling of the whole people of God:

“in their office the calling of the whole Church is focused and represented and it is their responsibility to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world.”⁶⁸

- 4.2 Ordination is a setting apart for a particular ministry by the laying on of hands and prayer. Ordination to the diaconal order of ministry involves an acceptance and commitment to a lifelong ministry of witness and service in the name of the Church. The 2004 report *What is a Deacon?* articulated a Methodist understanding of the diaconate as an order of ministry that is a particular expression of a shared calling to discipleship, is interdependent with all other forms of ministry within the whole people of God, and is distinctive in that it is marked by representative selection.⁶⁹ British Methodist Deacons focus and represent the servanthood of Christ by focusing the nature and meaning of this ministry, and encouraging and enabling others to “undertake this ministry with greater effectiveness in their own daily lives.”⁷⁰

- 4.3 A central theological question remains about the intention of the Methodist Church to ordain “to the diaconate in the Church of God”. Throughout the greater part of the Christian world (including the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Anglican Communion) the meaning of that expression would not be in doubt. The reference would be to ordination to the first of three “major orders of ministry” (the diaconate, the presbyterate, the episcopate – whose members are generally known, respectively, as deacons, priests and bishops).⁷¹ In such understandings bishops and presbyters also exercise a diaconal ministry.

- 4.4 The Methodist Church in Britain has affirmed that it has received two orders of ordained ministry, the diaconate and the presbyterate. Yet within this affirmation there is the implication that these are separate entities. This is illustrated by the fact that an ordained deacon cannot stay in Full Connexion as a deacon if they are subsequently accepted as a candidate for presbyteral ministry.⁷² This kind of distinctiveness of orders within ordained ministry is unusual. Furthermore, the two orders are united by them both expressing the vocation of the ordained, but are distinct in that one order of ordained ministry is also a dispersed religious order with distinct structures of oversight. Deacons are ordained into an order of ministry in the universal Church and received into Full Connexion with the Conference. This act of ordination and reception into Full Connexion also admits deacons

⁶⁸ *Statement on Ordination*, 1974 in ‘Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983’, p.135

⁶⁹ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 3.1

⁷⁰ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 3.3

⁷¹ *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 1.4.

⁷² SO 718(9) says: “Where the candidate is a deacon, he or she shall cease to be in Full Connexion as a deacon and to be a member of the Methodist Diaconal Order on the commencement of pre-ordination training or on entry upon probation, whichever is the earlier. If for any reason pre-ordination training or probation for the presbyterate is not completed, he or she shall be entitled to apply for reinstatement as a deacon under the provisions of Standing Order 761.”

to the religious order. The Methodist Church in Britain continues to be encouraged to wrestle with how it understands the relationship between the orders of ministry within the Methodist Church and in relation to the three-fold order.⁷³ Furthermore, it has become increasingly clear that the Methodist Church has an underdeveloped understanding of “order of ministry” and some further theological clarity would be helpful.

- 4.5 The consultations with members of the MDO in the autumn of 2015 revealed that, since 1993, the Methodist Church in Britain has not been particularly successful at nurturing an understanding of what an order of ministry is, nor has it fostered a sense of collegiality between presbyters and deacons as those who are in orders. Although deacons and presbyters have now trained for ministry together for many years, there was far more conversation about attention to the distinctive nature of the different ministries than acknowledgment of the similarities as those ordained in the Methodist Church into orders of ministry, and there continues to be a lack of opportunity for ministers to reflect together as those ordained by the Church.
- 4.6 One distinctive feature in the way in which Methodism thinks about orders of ministry is that the ordained are in Full Connexion with the Conference. This is an important part of Methodist ecclesiology, and an area that warrants further reflection. Although some deacons had a clear understanding that they were under the discipline of the Conference, many spoke of accountability primarily in terms of the religious order. It is noted that *What is a Deacon?*, drawing on the thinking of sociologist Michael Hill, speaks of the MDO as a religious order retaining a degree of “moral and organisational autonomy”.⁷⁴ This idea and its associated language are now recognised as unhelpful, particularly for a religious order that is also an order of ministry. Members of the MDO described how the Order has developed in its practices and self-understanding, and there has been much work undertaken (particularly in recent years) to embed the MDO in the structures of oversight within the church. For example, the bodies responsible for the oversight of student and probationer deacons and presbyters have now merged and the oversight processes are very similar – although some differences remain and some aspects still require further attention. It is also recognised that there is still work to be done in clarifying other aspects of oversight, as indicated in paragraph 1.4.
- 4.7 There are also questions about how deacons express the Church’s ministry of oversight. As noted in paragraph 2.4.4, deacons have, at times, had a particular role as assistants to the bishop in various aspects of this ministry. Within the Methodist Church today, deacons share in leadership in a variety of ways in collaboration with presbyters and lay members of the Church. Some further theological reflection of how deacons, with others, express the Church’s ministry of oversight would help in clarifying aspects of the role of deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain.
- 4.8 In its response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1983), the British Methodist Church noted that “... we take very seriously the concern that a separate diaconate might lead to a devaluation of the ministry of the laity.”⁷⁵ The Faith and Order Committee notes that reflections on the relationship of the diaconate to the laity, and on differences and the relationship of ordained diaconal ministry to lay ministry, were largely absent from the recent consultation conversations. Some further exploration of how those who are set

⁷³ *Moving Forward in Covenant*, 2011, Appendix 1: Conferring About the Diaconate, 22.

⁷⁴ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 7.7

⁷⁵ The response of the Methodist Church in Britain to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Conference Agenda, 1984, p.573.

apart as deacons encourage and enable the whole of the Methodist Church in Britain in its diaconal ministry would therefore be fruitful.

4.9 Within orders of ministry there are distinctive charisms, and the distinctive charism of the diaconal order of ministry is witness and service. Standing Orders⁷⁶ and the ordinal reaffirm our understanding of this. The ministry of many deacons involves acts of service in the form of social care (for example involvement in food banks), especially with those described as being socially marginalised. Yet, as a result of reflection on current experience, ecumenical conversations, and new insights into biblical understandings of *diakonia*, various challenges arise as to how deacons in the British Methodist Church focus and represent (and not just participate in) the *diakonia* of the Methodist Church in Britain:

4.9.1 A key aspect of the identity of a deacon is expressed through their ministry of proclamation. It is stated in *What is a Deacon?* that “Deacons are primarily heralds of the Gospel”⁷⁷ and this understanding is reflected in ecumenical dialogue.⁷⁸ Over the years, and particularly in recent conversations, it has become clear that Methodism would benefit from some further thinking about how this ministry of service and proclamation is embodied in the ministry of its ordained deacons. Discussions at the 2014 Convocation revealed that deacons express this ministry in a variety of ways, but that too often the ministry of proclamation was equated with preaching and the broader understanding is not embedded in the processes of the Church. A clearer articulation of how a Methodist deacon’s ministry of proclamation is understood and expressed, would help to deepen the Church’s understanding of the deacon’s role.

4.9.2 Catechesis has sometimes been a part of a ministry of proclamation and, as noted in paragraph 2.4.4, deacons have had a role in assisting bishops with this work. The World Council of Churches’ definition of diaconal ministry (see paragraph 2.5.2) includes reference to the teaching role of deacons, and this is emphasised in other traditions. The catechetical role of deacons is an area that is not given much attention within the Methodist Church in Britain and is something that warrants further consideration.

4.9.3 In the universal Church’s understanding of *diakonia*, word, worship and service are inextricably linked together. The British Methodist Church has already acknowledged the need for reflection on the liturgical role of deacons, and the 2012 Conference directed “the Faith and Order Committee to explore with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Ministries Committee the liturgical role of deacons within the Methodist Church and, if appropriate, find ways of affirming that.”⁷⁹ Some significant reflection has already been undertaken, including conversations at Convocation, but this remains an ongoing piece of work. It is recognised that a clearer response to the questions posed in paragraph 3.7 is an important foundational element of this work, and the Faith and Order Committee felt that those discussions should happen first. It is now hoped that attention can again be given to the work on the liturgical role of deacons and some further conversations with the MDO and the Ministries Committee can take place, in order for a response

⁷⁶ See, SO701.

⁷⁷ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 4.6.

⁷⁸ For example, *The Jerusalem Report*, 2012, p.11.

⁷⁹ Conference Resolution 35/4 (2012).

to be brought to the 2018 Conference at the latest.

- 4.9.4 From the conversations about the liturgical role of the deacon and reflections on their ministry of proclamation, it is clear that there is a particular and continuing question that remains to be resolved about whether all deacons should be local preachers. Once there has been further reflection on the ministry of proclamation and the liturgical role of deacons, then it will be an appropriate time for the more specific question of the preaching role and status of deacons to be addressed.
- 4.9.5 In recent years the language of pioneering has become more prevalent in conversations about diaconal ministry in the British Methodist Church⁸⁰, but it is as yet unclear how this relates to language of service and witness. At the same time, the Church has identified some people as pioneer ministers (including deacons, lay people and presbyters). This prompts questions about the understandings of and relationship between these different ministries, as well as questions about the MDO's understanding of itself as a pioneering order.
- 4.9.6 Recent research revealed that some Methodist deacons understood themselves as primarily engaged in a ministry that involved building bridges and forming connections,⁸¹ and this was reflected in the consultations at the Convocation in 2014, although some deacons were clear that they did not identify with these conclusions. This understanding emerged from conversations about the practice of diaconal ministry and primarily reflects on experience without more substantial theological engagement with Methodist ecclesiology and the shared understandings of diaconal ministry in the universal Church. It is not entirely clear whether the understanding of the deacon as a bridge-builder as expressed by some British Methodist deacons is the same as the idea, used in other contexts, of the deacon as a bridge that holds worship and service together. The term "bridge-builder" was also used within the conversations between the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England, but in the context of reflecting on leadership.
- 4.9.7 As the work continues, some attention to the differences between the ways in which deacons describe their own ministry and the language of the ordinal and the ways in which the Church has described the ministry of a deacon in the Methodist Church in Britain may be helpful.

4.10 **Key Questions for the Methodist Church in Britain to consider**

The reflections above indicate that there are a variety of areas that merit further theological consideration, and several key questions emerge:

- (1) How does the ministry of deacons enable and equip the diaconal ministry of the whole of the Methodist Church in Britain?
- (2) What is the Methodist Church in Britain's understanding of "orders of ministry": how does this relate to understandings in the universal Church and how might it be better embodied within the structures and processes of the Church? For example,

⁸⁰ For example in *What is a Deacon?*, in the way in which the MDO describes itself on its website and in various material as "A mission focused, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God's world", and in ecumenical conversations involving British Methodist Deacons.

⁸¹ Orton, A and Stockdale, T, 2014. *Making Connections: Exploring Methodist Deacons' Perspectives on Contemporary Diaconal Ministry*. Durham: Sacristry Press.

where is the oversight of the diaconal order of ministry specifically located?

- (3) What is the Methodist Church in Britain's understanding of a deacon's ministry of proclamation, and how might this be expressed? How does this understanding shape and inform their liturgical role, and what part does preaching play in the ministry of deacons?

5 **The Methodist Diaconal Order as a Religious Order**

5.1 Although the 1993 report made specific recommendations about the diaconate as an order of ministry, it was less clear about what is meant by the MDO as a religious order and the implications of this were not drawn out. As is noted in a discussion paper by George Lovell for Diaconal Regional Groups in December of that year, "This means that the concept of the MDO being a religious order is open to many interpretations which may well conflict."⁸² The paper further refers to questions that the then President of the Conference, Brian Beck, had put to the 1993 Convocation, namely:

- (1) Is the MDO a religious order or only a supportive fellowship?
- (2) What makes you different?
- (3) What are the bonds, common discipline, that hold you together and make you more than a supportive fellowship?
- (4) Do you have a mission statement which will hold you together?⁸³

It is significant that these questions were referred to in the recent consultations and remain relevant.

5.2 It was therefore recognised at the time, and remains the case, that attention needs to be given to how the MDO is understood as a religious order within the Methodist Church in Britain, and what kind of religious order the Church needs at this time. In an article in the Epworth review, former Warden of the MDO, Christine Walters, notes that: "Whilst the Church has been bringing to birth the new Diaconal Order and recognising us as an order of ministry, through a consultative process the Order has been working to redetermine the kind of religious order we should be to serve the present age."⁸⁴

5.3 **The Methodist Diaconal Order's Understanding of Itself as a Religious Order**

5.3.1 The interconnection of an order of ministry and a religious order in the Methodist Diaconal Order is encapsulated in these words from SO 728:

"Every person received into Full Connexion as a deacon becomes thereby also a full member of the Methodist Diaconal Order. Membership of the Order continues whilst the deacon remains in Full Connexion, and resignation from either Full Connexion or the Order automatically entails resignation from the other."

⁸² Lovell, G, December, 1993. *The MDO as a Religious Order: Some Issues for Consideration* (A Discussion Paper for Regional Groups), p.1

⁸³ Beck, B, 1993, in Lovell, G, December, 1993. *The MDO as a Religious Order: Some Issues for Consideration* (A Discussion Paper for Regional Groups), p.1

⁸⁴ Walters, C, 1996. *Epworth Review*

- 5.3.2 At their ordination, deacons (having already received a Bible as a sign of their ordained ministry) are presented with the badge of the MDO with these words:
“Receive this badge
As a sign of the membership of the Order
To which you have been admitted by your ordination.”

Therefore, the actions of the Conference, in receiving into Full Connexion and ordaining, together admit deacons into a religious order: but, it needs to be asked, what is meant by “religious order” as that term is applied to the MDO? Answering this question leads to another: whether or not the Methodist Church in Britain currently needs a religious order of this kind in order to serve the present age.

- 5.3.3 Conversations with members of the MDO at the Convocation in 2014 and the subsequent regional meetings, indicated that their identity (personally and corporately) as a religious order is central to their diaconal self-understanding; indeed, for many it is more important than their sense of belonging to an order of ministry. Many also felt that the supportive community of the religious order provided an important place of support, prayer, “rooting”, and structure for their diaconal ministry, especially where that ministry was described as pioneering or risk-taking.
- 5.3.4 The ethos and self-understanding of a religious organisation is not always easy to define, and so it is not surprising that there are different ways of interpreting the MDO as a religious order. One perspective is developed in the current handbooks for student deacons⁸⁵ and probationers⁸⁶. Both have sections that set out the background to the identity of the MDO as a religious order and invite those in training to reflect on their own understanding of a religious order. This is a good guide to the MDO’s self-understanding, as it developed in the 1990s. There is historical material on both the diaconate and religious orders, sketching out the background to historical Christian religious orders and setting the nineteenth-century development of deaconess orders within a wider revival of interest in both the religious life and in diaconal ministry. It sees the medieval women’s movement of the Beguines as particularly significant; these were women who did not take formal religious vows but lived according to a simple rule, working, engaging in prayer and good works. When it comes to discussing the MDO’s role as a religious order, the handbook largely depends on Michael Hill’s 1973 work⁸⁷, which is sociological in its approach rather than theological. As previously noted (4.6) there are questions about how much Hill’s work can now be relied on to help understandings of the MDO as the MDO has developed and moved on from this model; and yet its continued inclusion in the Handbooks for those in training indicates that it remains influential, if only in part.
- 5.3.5 The MDO student handbook also draws on the work done with George Lovell, who acted as a consultant with the MDO in the early 1990s. This aimed to provide the MDO, through a complex process of consultation with its members, with a mission statement

⁸⁵ Methodist Diaconal Order (2015). *Student Handbook*. London, MDO.

⁸⁶ Methodist Diaconal Order (2014). *Supplementary Handbook for probationers*. MDO, Birmingham.

⁸⁷ Hill, M, 1973. *The Religious Order: A Study of Virtuoso Religion and its legitimation in the nineteenth-century Church of England*. London, Heinemann. Hill’s main focus is the development of new religious orders in the Anglican churches in the nineteenth century. The opening chapters provide a sociological analysis of religious orders and a description of an ‘ideal type’. It is this ideal type that is used by the MDO in its training material.

based on its own experience and vision.⁸⁸ Lovell, in his work with the Order, drew on an article by the Jesuit scholar George Aschenbrenner⁸⁹ who makes a distinction between the monastic religious life (focused on the apostolate of formal prayer) and the active religious life (focused on a ministry of service). Lovell hoped that the MDO could see itself combining these two aspects of religious life. The handbook invites students to see the MDO embracing aspects of the monastic and active apostolic dynamics, with the MDO Rule of Life pointing the way. This Rule tries to balance the elements of personal commitment to a life of prayerful service within a dispersed Christian community, with personal freedom to decide for oneself exactly how this life is to be expressed. It is not compulsory, although “it is hoped that it will be freely followed and adapted to each deacon’s lifestyle”.⁹⁰ The result is that the Rule has relatively little within it about personal accountability and oversight within the MDO. Similarly, the relationship between the MDO as a religious order and the wider Methodist Church is underdeveloped.

5.3.6 The MDO’s Mission Statement was approved by the 1997 Convocation, but it was rarely referred to during the consultations and some deacons were unaware of its existence. More emphasis was given to (and more appreciation expressed for) the strapline which the MDO has used in recent years and which describes the MDO as: “A mission focused, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God’s world.”⁹¹ Although widely used on material produced by the MDO this statement has not been interrogated nor approved by the Methodist Church.

5.3.7 A written account cannot convey every aspect of a group as diverse as the MDO. Its ethos and self-understanding are also held in the collective memories of its members and expressed through their lives of prayer and service. For many members of the MDO, membership of an Order is an expression of their vocation to live out their Christian discipleship as an expression of the ministry of the Methodist Church. To be a member of a religious order means, for them, sharing common responsibility for decisions, watching over each other in love and responding together to the needs of the Church. Participation in the Rule of Life and daily prayer for each other, meeting at the Convocation and in Area Groups, and the lifelong commitment and accountability to one another were frequently cited as things of importance. As a religious order, then, the MDO is seen as a tool of Christian mission. The Rule of Life gives limited guidance on this and, although the Area Groups provide some structure for pastoral oversight, this is quite light. Members of the Order experience the prayerful support of their sisters and brothers and through this are sustained in their own challenging situations of ministry.

5.3.8 The Faith and Order Committee believes that, some twenty years after the last major review, it is timely to look again at the identity of the MDO as a religious order. In order to do so it is necessary to look more carefully at the different kinds of religious order and the way in which characteristics of religious orders are shared by groups that do not

⁸⁸ The consultancy process through which Lovell worked with the Order is written up in: George Lovell, (2000). *Consultancy, Ministry and Mission*. Burns and Oates, pp.155-180.

⁸⁹ Aschenbrenner, G, 1986. “Active and Monastic: Two Apostolic Lifestyles.” *Review for Religious*. 45(5): pp.653-667.

⁹⁰ methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk

⁹¹ methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk

necessarily adopt that name.

5.4 The Development of Religious Orders, and their Variety

- 5.4.1 The term 'religious order' has been applied to many different kinds of groups, some with radically contrasting aims, rules of life and activities. Consequently, to call an organisation a religious order is not sufficient; it requires further qualification.
- 5.4.2 Religious orders within Christianity began with the early coenobitic groups in the Egyptian desert and developed in early monasticism, east and west. Eastern Christianity appears to have a fairly straightforward understanding of monasticism, without separate orders. Traditionally, bishops in the Eastern churches have always been monks, though parish priests are usually married. In the West it has been different, with many contrasting religious orders developing, each with its particular charism and rule of life. Surprisingly, the best known group (the Benedictines) is not strictly speaking a religious order at all, but a federation of communities.
- 5.4.3 Roughly speaking, religious orders in the first millennium were focused on the enclosed religious life, dedicated to the pursuit of holiness, to (in St Benedict's words) "prefer nothing to Christ". These communities developed considerable educational and charitable responses, but this was not their main purpose.
- 5.4.4 The later Middle Ages saw the development of new orders, including the mendicant friars (Dominicans and Franciscans) who saw themselves having a ministry out in the world. Whereas traditional religious communities, like the Benedictines, laid their stress on *stabilitas* (remaining in one place and living in community), the newer orders were (to use Methodist language) itinerant, going to where they were most needed. It may be significant that St Francis was reputed to have remained in deacon's orders to the end of his life. These new orders had a missionary function, both within the boundaries of Christendom and beyond. The order, its community and spirituality, was directed more towards the ministry of preaching and apostolic witness and was less directed to building up of the religious community and the spirituality of its members.
- 5.4.5 The Reformation of the sixteenth century prompted – in some areas of Europe – the dissolution of monasteries and the return of many monks and nuns to life in the wider community. At the same time, the Reformation encouraged all Christians to embrace the life of prayer and commitment that had previously been associated with religious orders. This emphasis was intensified by the English Puritans and German Pietists of the seventeenth century, both of whom had a profound effect on early Methodism. So, for example, the pietist Philip Spener's *Pia Desideria* urges all his fellow Lutherans to embrace their vocation as a holy priesthood and to devote themselves to prayer, Bible study and sacrificial service.⁹²
- 5.4.6 The post-Reformation Catholic Church saw an explosion in religious orders dedicated to works of charity and/or the missionary work of the Church, though these have only been officially recognised as orders by the Catholic Church over the last century. This model of religious order begins with a sense of vocation to a particular area of ministry/service, perhaps education, or evangelism or healthcare or the relief of

⁹² Spencer, P. (1974). *Pia Desideria*, translated by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press, p.94

poverty. The spiritual and community life of the order resources and strengthens the mission. One example would be the Sisters of Mercy.⁹³

5.4.7 The nineteenth-century development of deaconess orders across European and American Protestant churches seems to reflect these later developments and their focus on service and mission. Within Anglicanism some new religious orders were established with a traditional 'Catholic' ethos, living in communities and requiring lifelong vows. The deaconess orders, developing first among German Lutherans, worked in similar situations of human need, but were wary of appearing too Catholic. It is within this movement that the Methodist diaconal orders first developed.

5.4.8 While recruitment to traditional religious orders has declined sharply – at least in the West – there has in recent years been an upsurge in what has been called “new monasticism”. These groups, many of which include Methodists in their membership, deserve fuller attention. They may well suggest ways in which the MDO could develop in the future and they might also help the MDO express what is particular about its own style of religious order. Some contemporary expressions of religious orders and similar groups include:

- (1) The Northumbria Community⁹⁴ describes itself as a dispersed network through which Christians offer each other mutual support as fellow pilgrims. It is “a way” to express “The Way” and draws inspiration from Celtic traditions of spirituality. Members adopt a simple rule of life and meet together in local or regional groups.
- (2) The Iona Community⁹⁵ is also dispersed and ecumenical, but has a primary vocation to work “for peace, social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship.” There is a simple rule of life and different categories of membership, expressing different degrees of commitment.
- (3) The Corrymeela Community⁹⁶ has some features in common with Iona, but is very focused on the ministry of reconciliation through its centre in Northern Ireland. The membership is dispersed, but there is a period of discernment for those who wish to join and members are expected to share in both community meetings and the ministry of reconciliation.
- (4) The Church Army has its origin in the evangelical wing of the Church of England. It is now recognised by the Church of England as a “Mission Community.” Its focus of ministry is evangelism in different forms, and it has a rule of life and a selection and training programme. Members may work for a Church Army project or apply for posts in other situations.
- (5) The Community of St Anselm⁹⁷ is a recent initiative by the Archbishop of Canterbury and based at Lambeth Palace. Young people between the ages of 20 and 35 are invited to spend a year in a “radical Jesus-centred community”.

⁹³ www.sistersofmercy.org/about-us/our-history

⁹⁴ www.northumbriacommunity.org

⁹⁵ www.iona.org.uk

⁹⁶ www.corrymeela.org

⁹⁷ www.stanselm.org.uk

- (6) Whilst the Roman Catholic Church has a long history of formal religious orders, there are also movements that have many of the characteristics of a religious order. One of these is Focolare⁹⁸, which describes itself as “an international movement, inspired by the gospel, working for unity in all spheres of life.” Founded by Chiara Lubich in Italy during world war two, it is a lay-led movement that draws in Christians of other denominations and members of other faiths. It includes some who consecrate their lives to the movement; these are celibate, living in community but following a professional life. Others are associated with the movement as families or as part of its groups.
- (7) As well as these new groups, there are also possibilities for associate membership of more traditional religious orders. The best known are the third-order Franciscans, again with several Methodist members.⁹⁹

5.4.9 It is worth noting that it has not usually been the norm for members of religious orders necessarily to be members of an order of ministry. There are some exceptions, in the cases of orders of Roman Catholic or Anglican priests. In Benedictine communities, for example, some members are ordained and some are not. The MDO is unique in being a religious order where ordination to the diaconal order of ministry is the entry point. The nearest parallel we can find is the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), a Roman Catholic religious order, where many members of the religious order are also ordained priests thus expressing a vocation to a religious life and also to ordained ministry. Yet, whilst a substantial proportion of Jesuits are also members of the order of priests/presbyters very few of the order of priests within the Roman Catholic Church are also members of the religious order of the Society of Jesus, or indeed any other religious order. It is therefore hard to find another example of where all members of a particular religious order are also at the same time all members of an order of ordained ministry; nor can we find another example whereby ordination to a particular order of ministry is accompanied by the person becoming a member of a particular religious order within the same liturgical act or ordinal.

5.4.10 Similarly, members of religious orders do not usually receive a stipend and housing in order to exercise an authorised ministry. Indeed, religious orders have often found here a freedom of operation in tension with the more institutional aspects of the Church.

5.4.11 A key aspect of the religious order has been oversight. In traditional orders, this has been expressed through accountability (sometimes with a vow of obedience) to a community and its leader. Oversight is more difficult to determine with dispersed groups and less formal movements.

5.5 **Religious Orders and Methodism**

5.5.1 So, we should ask, does claiming a small group within Methodism as a religious order detract from the more general calling of the Church, or does it draw attention to it by representing the ideal to which we should all be aiming? If the second, in what ways

⁹⁸ www.focolare.org/gb/

⁹⁹ tssf.org.uk

does the MDO help the Methodist Church as a whole fulfil its calling?

- 5.5.2 It will be helpful to ask whether there is anything in the MDO's understanding of religious order that should not also apply to the whole membership of the Methodist Church. It may be fruitful to explore the relationship and distinction between membership of a Methodist society (and the obligations that carries) and membership of a Methodist religious order. Yet, any particular Methodist church will be composed of people with varied degrees of Christian commitment and our churches usually pride themselves on their openness to all. It could be argued that the MDO is, as a religious order, a living reminder of what Methodism is really about, an aspiration that inspires the many through the example of the few.
- 5.5.3 As its nineteenth-century founder, Thomas Bowman Stephenson, was careful to distance the Deaconess Order from more 'catholic' orders – so dispensing with vows, for instance – and because the present MDO is neither a celibate order nor one based on community living, there is a need to look more carefully at what it means for the MDO to be a religious order, and how that order reflects the nature and calling of the Methodist Church.

5.6 Key Questions for Consideration

- 5.6.1 Can greater clarity be given to the MDO's identity as a religious order? If, as one MDO member has said, the order's charism is the sacrament of care, and its apostolate is to enable the whole Church become the hands and feet of Christ, what kind of religious order should the MDO be? Other members of the MDO argued that, in modelling community, the MDO embodies an understanding of connexionalism to Local Churches; whilst others thought that the MDO could model a pattern of spirituality.
- 5.6.2 Does a religious order within the Methodist Church need to be restricted to those who are ordained deacons? Is there room for others to share in the religious order dimension of the MDO's life?
- 5.6.3 What is the appropriate form of oversight for a religious order and its members in the Methodist Church in Britain? The combination of religious order and order of ministry leads to some challenging questions, as oversight of members of an order of ministry necessarily takes place through church structures.

6 **Conclusion and Further Work**

- 6.1 As the needs of the Church and wider society have changed, the kind of ministry undertaken by Methodist deacons has been diverse. This report began by acknowledging that the story of the MDO was one of pilgrimage and the changing contexts of twenty-first century ministry prompt questions about the nature of ordained diaconal ministry today. How might the ministry of deacons help the Methodist Church in Britain to respond to God's call to serve and witness in contemporary society?
- 6.2 The Faith and Order Committee brings this response as an interim report for the following reasons:

- 6.2.1 Relatively early in the process, it was recognised that the questions identified in paragraph 3.7 were fundamental, and that focusing initial reflection in these areas would then enable their more specific aspects to be better addressed. For example, there is a variety of questions about the oversight of deacons, but a clear response to these hinges on the nature of the relationship between the diaconate as an order of ministry and as a religious order. The Faith and Order Committee therefore understood the work as a two-stage process. It is intended that the more specific questions and issues identified (such as those in 4.10) shall now be further explored and a final report brought to the 2018 Conference.
- 6.2.2 Since the Conference directed that this work be undertaken, it has also directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Ministries Committee to “undertake work on the theology and nature of lay and ordained ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain” and to bring a final report to the Conference of 2018.¹⁰⁰ It is clear that some of the questions about the nature of ordained diaconal ministry cannot be addressed without consideration of other ministries in the Methodist Church, and the broader piece of work on ministry will inevitably involve reflection on some overlapping issues. In order to ensure coherent and comprehensive thinking, the Faith and Order Committee therefore intends to continue its reflections on the nature of the diaconate as part of its work on ministry in the Methodist Church, building on the work already undertaken, mindful of the importance of continuing to consult with the MDO, and ensuring that specific attention is paid to the questions and issues raised in section four of this report.
- 6.3 As the theological work continues, it is hoped that attention will also be given to the opportunities for focusing diaconal ministry. For example, several of the consultation conversations acknowledged the role that finance played, particularly in relation to diaconal appointments in stationing, and it was argued that deacons were sometimes sent where they could be afforded rather than where they were needed. The vision of sending deacons to areas of specific need, and forming intentional communities in those places, was something that was referred to in several places. Such a vision would have significant implications, not least in relation to stationing, finance and questions about whether recruitment to the MDO should be numerically restricted; but consideration of alternative ways of enabling deacons to focus a ministry of witness and service will help to clarify and articulate the understanding of the diaconate held by the Methodist Church in Britain.
- 6.4 The current interest in religious communities and search for meaningful spirituality also mean that this is an exciting time for the Methodist Church to reflect on the nature of the MDO as a religious order. Although some of the questions are challenging, there are also opportunities for creative exploration as the Methodist Church in Britain continues to determine what kind of Methodist religious order might best serve the Church in the present age.
- 6.5 The Conference has previously noted that British Methodism makes a contribution to the wider Church as its deacons focus and represent servant ministry “as much through being members of a religious order as being part of an order of ministry in Full Connexion with the Conference.”¹⁰¹ However, the Methodist Church in Britain has struggled to articulate this contribution in theological and ecclesiological terms. Persisting questions and tensions, particularly those pertaining to oversight, continue to challenge the Church to examine this

¹⁰⁰ *Resolution 35/2*, 2014 Conference.

¹⁰¹ *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, 7.1

relationship. As this report advocates the need for further clarity to be brought as to the nature of the MDO as a religious order in the British Methodist Church, the Faith and Order Committee believes that the time is right to ask whether the religious order should remain a closed order or whether it is now appropriate to consider enabling membership of the religious order to be open to other Methodists, lay and ordained. This is a question for the whole Church to consider, and a resolution to this effect is therefore brought to the Conference.

6.6 Exploration and discussion about the relationship between the diaconate as an order of ministry and the religious order raise one final question that it is timely and appropriate for the Methodist Church in Britain to address, namely: should it be a further requirement that deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain be admitted into a religious order by virtue of their reception into Full Connexion and ordination? It is suggested that this question is explored at the same time as consideration is given to the nature of the religious order.

6.7 This report has sought to give an account of the diaconate as an order of ministry and as a religious order and to identify the issues and questions that are yet to be fully addressed. It is clear that some further work is required so that a better account of the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate in the Methodist Church in Britain can be provided. It is further recognised that many of these questions relate to our understanding of ministry and oversight and they cannot therefore be explored in isolation. The Faith and Order Committee therefore presents this interim report to the Conference, with the intention of bringing a final response as part of the work on ministry in the Methodist Church to the 2018 Conference.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

33/1. The Conference received the Report.

33/2. The Conference directed the Methodist Council, with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, to consider whether the religious order should be opened to receive into membership Methodists who are lay or ordained to presbyteral ministry and report to the 2018 Conference.

33/3. The Conference directed the Methodist Council, with the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Faith and Order Committee, to consider whether those whom it ordains to the diaconal order of ministry continue to be required also to become members of the religious order and report to the 2018 Conference.