

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Exploring Methodist Deacons'
Perspectives on Contemporary
Diaconal Ministry

Executive Summary



The Methodist Church



Durham
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For All God's People to Serve the Present Age

Introduction

Diaconal ministry matters in the contemporary Church for a wide range of reasons:

- Increasingly, churches are exploring the potential of this ministry to help them serve others in ways that are relevant to the current context.
- In doing this, diaconal ministry is often involved in helping to forge improved connections between churches and wider society.
- It is also involved in empowering others to get more involved in making these connections.

However, diaconal ministry has also raised many controversies, both historically and also in the current context. This executive summary provides a brief outline of new research that explored these issues through the perspectives of deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain. It has been based on extensive research with deacons, including wide-ranging observations and interviews over a two-year period between 2009 and 2011.

This executive summary provides an outline of the issues covered in more detail in the full report, and the recommendations arising from them.

These issues related to six key themes:

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The diversity of deacons' ministries

Deacons work in a wide range of settings, with a diverse range of people, in ways that appear to encompass a wide range of different objectives. Much of this diversity had arisen as a result of deacons seeking to respond flexibly to the changing needs of the Church in different times and places. Deacons have also brought diverse gifts to their ministries and placed these at the disposal of the Church. The Methodist Church in Britain has sought to match these gifts to the needs of particular places by moving and placing deacons through its 'stationing' process. Deacons emphasised how they saw their ministry as inherently creative. This creativity included reflecting with others on traditional understandings and developing innovative activities where appropriate.

This meant that many deacons saw the nature of their ministry as not easily fitting into any one particular category, as to attempt to do so would significantly limit its potential to be creative.

However, the apparent diversity of deacons' ministries had also meant that deacons often encountered misunderstandings of their role and contribution. Furthermore, deacons often found it difficult to describe what was shared between their ministries, although there were some common themes (which are explored in this report). Instead, they often preferred to demonstrate what their ministry was about through modelling it, showing it through who they were.

Despite sometimes having difficulties with finding adequate language, deacons frequently demonstrated a deep understanding of their ministry through the examples of good practice that they shared. Analysis of these examples showed that the deacons frequently found ways to connect together:

- what diaconal ministry seeks to do;
- how deacons go about doing this;
- the connections and relationships formed through their ministry;
- who deacons are; and
- what deacons offered to others and the Church through their ministry.

The idea of 'making connections' in various ways was central to deacons' practice, as the rest of the report goes on to explore.

Making connections...

...between missional presence, service, discernment, witness and enabling others

Deacons saw their ministry as contributing towards the wider mission and ministry of the whole Church. They did this by linking together aspects of presence, service, discernment, witness and enabling others.

Missional presence involved deacons actively making themselves available to others. They did this by coming alongside people wherever they were, being with them, listening and building relationships. This often involved creating times and spaces where people could linger to form relationships, a process which takes considerable time. Deacons recognised that they were able to do this only because the Church had freed them up from other responsibilities, and were grateful for this. Many recognised that their presence enabled them to show solidarity with those in difficult situations, and represent the Church in this solidarity.

Missional service involved deacons asking ‘What does it mean to be a servant in this place?’ and then doing it, showing love by responding to needs. Deacons saw this as central to their work. It was important for them to reflect critically on how to do this in ways that were consistent with Jesus’ example.

Missional discernment involved deacons in ‘interpreting where God is in every situation’, seeking to spot where God was active and then get involved. This often involved deacons in ‘joining up the dots’: seeing a bigger picture of potential opportunities and then connecting these together.

Missional witness involved communicating the Gospel in diverse ways, in words as well as actions, ‘sharing and talking about Jesus’ and ‘trying to be Christ in the world’.

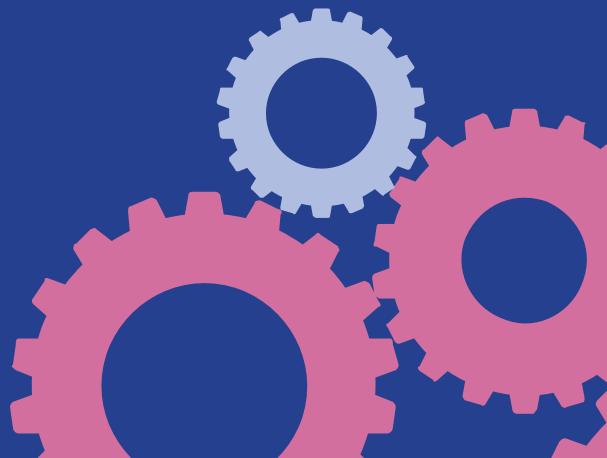
Encouraging, enabling and equipping others to get involved in forms of diaconal ministry was central to deacons’ understandings of what a deacon’s ministry was about. In understanding the discourses that deacons shared, it became increasingly important to distinguish more carefully between deacons and diaconal ministry in the following way:

whilst deacons do diaconal ministry (and indeed provide a particular focus for it), this doesn’t mean that all diaconal ministry is done by deacons.

Deacons’ examples of good practice frequently involved forming creative links between these different aspects of their ministry. Their challenges and dilemmas were also often rooted in the ways that these different aspects interacted together, and in their decisions about how best to make these links. For example, deacons often reflected on what the underlying purposes of their presence might be, and how to discern when it was ethically appropriate to talk about God when offering unconditional service.

In many of their examples, a remarkable ‘ripple effect’ occurred:

by ‘just’ being present and offering gracious acts of unconditional service in Christ’s name, people often responded in ways that saw the Gospel spread.



Making connections...

...within and between churches and wider communities, especially with those who are marginalised and excluded

Deacons frequently saw a key purpose of their ministry as making connections between the diverse groups of people with whom they were involved, both inside and outside churches. By being involved across multiple communities, and often working with those on the margins of all of them, deacons were frequently involved in **representing one group to another**. This provided deacons with important opportunities to **build bridges between them**. However, deacons often questioned simplistic views about whether building bridges between churches and wider communities would necessarily lead to increased attendance at existing Sunday church services. Instead, deacons often saw their ministry as being more preparatory, helping to lay the groundwork for relationships with God, or working with a more holistic sense of healing for those involved.

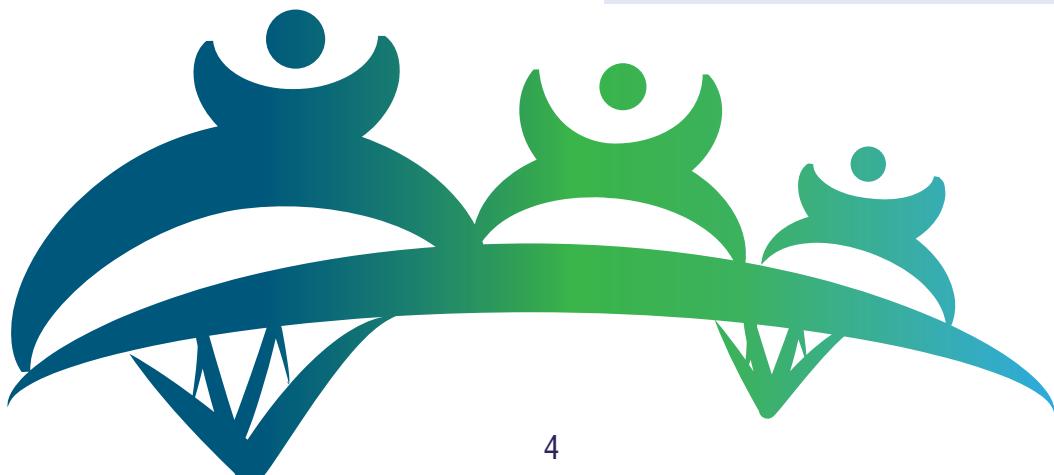
They also recognised that by bringing the needs of those on the edge in various ways to churches, their role could irritate and **stimulate change**. From all of these elements, fresh expressions of church sometimes emerged, growing out of the relationships formed.

Deacons also frequently found themselves connecting together those that were isolated within churches (such as by visiting those who have become housebound). They also got involved in bringing others together outside churches, such as by linking various agencies working on common issues together within local communities.

Why 'who deacons are' was central to their ability to make these connections

Deacons repeatedly emphasised that 'who they were' was at least as important as 'anything that they did'. They were able to weave together connections between different groups by maintaining their own integrity whilst moving between these groups. They modelled within themselves how the wider Church could be involved in wider society and how the voices of the marginalised could reshape the Church. By making these links with a Church mandate to do so, they represented how Christians might get involved in responding to difficult social issues and engage more effectively with those who are marginalised. In doing this, they sought to bring others to get involved alongside them, having shown some ways in which this might be done. To make these links, deacons often had to reflect on how they presented themselves. Debates over issues such as what clothes they should wear in particular contexts were common. These symbolised the ways they constantly asked themselves '**What sort of deacon do I need to be in this situation?**' in order to make these connections.

Deacons found themselves having to constantly move between communities, adjusting the ways they presented themselves to make themselves approachable in different circumstances. They recognised that church members often didn't see a lot of the work they did with others. In addition, there was an ever-present risk that in engaging with those 'on the edge', deacons found themselves 'out on a limb', operating in an isolated way without support. Maintaining deacons' connections with worshipping church communities was crucial, both to prevent them from becoming isolated and to help support the sustainability of the links they established.



Relationships between ministries, both lay and ordained

The development of positive relationships between the ministries of deacons and the ministries of others was seen as crucial to successfully forming the connections which were at the heart of deacons' ministries. However, there were frequent tensions between deacons and others in their ministries. These occurred especially when deacons were considered to be "treading on others' toes" when they were engaged in what appeared to be similar roles to them. For example, these tensions were recognized as sometimes occurring with presbyters, lay Christians, professionals in other agencies, etc. This overlap was frequently likely to occur, as deacons often passed through the domains where these others operated, in order to make links which connected these domains together. These tensions were exacerbated when the connecting nature of the deacons' role was not well explained or understood. The tensions were also exacerbated by deacons' tendencies to define themselves negatively in terms of how they were different to those in these other roles, rather than positively in terms of how they understood their own role. Indeed, many of the explanations given by deacons about how their role was distinctive from the roles of others were highly problematic. Their explanations of what was distinctive to a deacon's role were problematic because those things that they described as distinctive to their role **were precisely the things that they were seeking to enable and encourage others to become involved in.**

To resolve this tension, it was crucial to recognise the difference between the general call of all Christians to diaconal ministry and the specific call of deacons to *ordained* diaconal ministry. The specific call of deacons was to be a focus for this ministry, providing leadership in it and supporting each other through their common commitment to belonging to the Methodist Diaconal Order. However, there were some

concerns expressed where ordination was being presented as the primary means by which individuals could represent the wider Church. This could discourage lay people from getting involved in ministries, and disempower them from representing the Church and Gospel within their ministries and everyday lives. Whilst the existence of the current itinerant stipendiary model of deacons' ministry was widely supported, further questions were raised about whether there might also be an appropriate way to recognise others who might provide more locally-based leadership in diaconal ministry. The relationship between deacons as an order of ministry and membership of the Methodist Diaconal Order provides an additional important dimension to these questions and debates.

Such important questions were often overshadowed by more high profile debates about how deacons' and presbyters' roles should relate together. This was notwithstanding broad support for the official Methodist Church positions in the Conference Papers 'What is a Deacon?' and 'What is a Presbyter?'. Many deacons saw themselves as freed up by the Church to have a more flexible role. However, they found it highly problematic to try to draw generalised hard and fast distinctions, and recognised considerable areas of overlap. An image of **differing foci** worked much better than two distinct categories of ministry with firm boundaries and no overlap. The best examples that deacons gave of successful collaborative working were where ministry teams managed to **negotiate supportively with each other in particular local contexts**. However, this involved designing and negotiating the deacon's role carefully in each particular context from the outset, in ways that took into account wider experience and Church guidance.

The impact of history

The historical way in which these roles had developed had a huge impact on contemporary practice. This needed recognition to understand the current situation more fully. The diversity and flexibility of deacons' roles had developed out of the Church's changing requirements for their ministry over this history. The gendered way in which deaconesses had historically received less favourable treatment, and the continued questions that deacons received from congregations about when they would become 'proper ministers', also continued to impact on deacons' identities in the contemporary context. Despite feeling that this continued impact sometimes undermined their role, deacons were sometimes able to find advantages to this in their ministry. For example, the ambiguous ways in which they were sometimes viewed by others could be used reflectively by deacons to help with their ministry of building connections, particularly between lay and ordained people. However, there was the potential for their in-between position to exacerbate the risk of deacons themselves feeling marginalised and not understood. This emphasised further the need for the Church's different ministries to inter-relate supportively together.

Formation, learning and development in deacons' ministries

Deacons generally found their ministry both highly rewarding and incredibly challenging, involving both significant joys and considerable stresses. Their 'Rule of Life' included important principles which enabled them to seek to individually balance their competing commitments and to support each other in doing so. Itinerancy presented particular stresses for deacons and especially for their families. The community of the Methodist Diaconal Order as a religious order was important to the deacons. The Order provided, a structure which cultivated collective spirituality and mutual support in a wide range of ways. These ways included through prayer, Area Groups and Convocation. It also provided a collective source of common identity, forming a group within which deacons felt their ministry was implicitly understood. Given the common pressures and misunderstandings of their identities and practices within local contexts, this was important as it gave them a safe space where they felt they belonged.

A number of deacons emphasised how their identity and practice as deacons was 'caught' by being around each other. They emphasised the importance of placements and talking together with other deacons on their own formation journeys. There was a culture which encouraged continuing flexible adaptation and the learning of necessary skills as each deacon went from place to place, in response to particular local needs. At times, this culture interacted with other practical barriers to limit the likelihood of deacons taking up some types of continuing training opportunities. For example, the requirement to be flexible and potentially have to change roles frequently could be seen as discouraging the development of specialist skills which might take longer to acquire. Such barriers could be

exacerbated by processes which required deacons to proactively search for relevant training and apply for funding to resource it, having to justify why they wanted to do it (not why they did not).

A focus on learning about deacons' ministry through 'catching it' (rather than communicating their ministry clearly in words) was also recognised as adding to wider church confusion about their role. This was because those who weren't deacons often seemed to struggle to understand how their experiences of encountering diverse deacons fitted together, and what linked these different deacons' expressions of diaconal ministry.

Initial formation and training

All these dimensions raised particular issues in terms of how deacons should be supported in their initial formation and training. There were considerable debates about what should be included in deacons' initial training, how this should be structured, and how this should relate to the training of others, particularly presbyters. There was widespread concern that training institutions needed to adapt their curriculum more to take into account the particular nature of deacons' ministry, and engage more effectively with a wider range of learning styles. For many, the training period was highly pressured and demanding. This was exacerbated where additional requirements for deacons were imposed on top of existing presbyter-oriented curriculums.

Spiritual direction was considered important in deacons' continuing development, but not all deacons were clear how this might best be used, and many had to personally pay to access this and/or other forms of supervision. Some additional aspects of the culture within the Methodist Diaconal Order and wider Church were supportive of continuing learning and development for deacons, whilst there was significant potential to develop others further.



Recommendations

Based on these research findings, the report offers a range of recommendations for **encouraging wider reflection and continued dialogue** which will enable learning about good practice in diaconal ministry to continue. Central to all these recommendations is the encouragement of a process that considers **how those involved in different ministries can learn from each other more**. This process includes proactively encouraging learning between deacons within the Methodist Diaconal Order. It also includes creating more positive spaces for learning together involving deacons, the wider Church and wider society. Within this process, the research suggests that it is important to pay particular attention to what can be learnt from the perspectives of those who are marginalised by Church and/or wider society. This includes critically reflecting on the ways that contemporary understandings of ministries within particular churches have been affected by their historical process of development. Further complementary research which explored the perspectives of those involved in other ministries about how they understood their own ministries is important. This would be a significant help in developing and resourcing future dialogue into the relationships between ministries further. Further research into the perspectives of those with whom deacons work in wider communities would also be important to gain additional perspectives.

In terms of developing a clearer understanding of diaconal ministry, the report offers an analysis of deacons' ministries that centres on **making connections** in a wide range of ways. Exploring the ways that missional forms of presence, discernment, service, witness, and enabling others combine together within diaconal ministry is important. These understandings inform a range of recommendations concerning **how deacons and others might support each other in building these connections and relationships**, which are central to the Church's participation in God's mission. These include being aware of particular risks for diaconal ministry to end up 'out on a limb', and

considering ways of improving deacons' appropriate involvement in worship so that their work remains sustainably embedded in the wider Church. Practical actions could make a difference here. For example, organising deacons from local Area Groups to proactively and systematically support Circuits at the point when appointments are being designed could help them to be designed in an appropriate way. Well-designed appointments are crucial if the connections at the heart of deacons' ministries are to be made and sustained. There is also a need for the wider Church to engage in further consideration of issues relating to the recognition and support of wider diaconal ministries. This includes how these wider forms of diaconal ministry can also be empowered to represent the Church in this work, alongside those who fit within existing understandings of itinerant, stipendiary, ordained ministries.

Finally, the report recommends that the Methodist Church further develops its programme of formation and continuing development for those involved in diaconal ministries, including particularly for deacons. Reflecting together on developing this provision, in light of the issues from practice highlighted in this report and in light of wider theological debates, is important. By doing so, this vital process of formation and continuing development could be further resourced and supported, in the context of the Church's broader understandings of mission and ministry.

Overall, both this summary and the full report can only just scratch the surface of what might be learned from critically considering deacons' understandings of their own ministries. However, it is hoped that the project has constructively supported the continuing reflections of a wide range of people in questioning what good practice in diaconal ministry might comprise. By doing so, it is hoped that the Church has been supported, at least in some small way, to consider how everyone can engage effectively in this aspect of God's relational and transformational mission in Christ's name.

Additional Resources Available:

As well as supporting reflection on these issues by deacons in the Methodist Church, the research has also informed the development of learning and practice via conference presentations at multiple national and international church and academic conferences. Several new resources are becoming available from this project to share the findings more widely, including:

1. Electronic copies of this executive summary of the research findings are available to download for free at: www.durham.ac.uk/wsc.online/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Executive-Summary-Document1.pdf
2. A special edition of the free online 'Theology and Ministry' journal has been published on diaconal ministry. This has been developed out of the 'Making Connections: Exploring Contemporary Diaconal Ministry' conference that was held in Durham in September 2011 as part of this research, and includes various articles developed from presentations that were made there. It is available at: www.durham.ac.uk/theologyandministry/volumes/2
3. An academic journal article has been published in a leading international journal, the 'International Journal of Practical Theology'. This article is titled: "The diverse and contested diaconate: Why understanding this ministry is crucial to the future of the Church". This sets the experience of Deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain in a comparative global and ecumenical context, and explores the significance of diaconal ministry.
This is available from: www.degruyter.com/view/j/ijpt-2012-16-issue-2/ijpt-2012-0017/ijpt-2012-0017.xml?format=INT
4. The full report is due to be published as a book later this year by Sacristy Press, and will be available for purchase from: www.sacristy.co.uk

Links to all these and any subsequent publications (including open access electronic versions where possible) are available via Andrew Orton's webpage: www.durham.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?mode=staff&id=3292



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