

# The Contemporary Nature of Diaconal Ministry in British Methodism: Purposes and Processes of Good Practice

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## Abstract

This article highlights key findings emerging from a two-year project focusing on the contemporary nature of diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain, drawing on the practices and perspectives of deacons in this denomination. Within this research, ‘building bridges’ and ‘forming connections’ emerged as central aims within deacons’ accounts of their own ministry, both within and between churches and wider communities. Understanding the processes by which these aims were achieved was an essential part of understanding this ministry. In exploring how deacons seek to form connections and build bridges, key themes of ‘presence’, ‘service’, ‘discernment’ and ‘witness’ are explored. However, deacons did not just seek to make these connections themselves; they also sought to enable, encourage & equip others to be involved in diaconal ministry. Through exploring these deacons’ understandings within their own narratives, the article demonstrates the potential for the wider Church to learn from the way ministry and mission are interconnected in their practice.

**Keywords:** Deacon; Ministry; Connections; Learning; Enabling.

## Introduction

Many churches are engaging in renewed reflection on the diaconate in response to the challenges of ministry and mission within contemporary society, as the various articles within this special edition explore.<sup>1</sup> This article considers how insights gained from systematic empirical research and reflection on the current practice of this ministry might help Christian communities as they seek to respond faithfully to the diverse and changing needs of contemporary society. Because deacons often operate at this interface between churches and wider societal contexts, their experiences provide an invaluable setting for exploring the challenges and

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly see Avis in this volume. Also see: Paul Avis, ‘Wrestling with the Diaconate’, *Ecclesiology* 5, No. 1, (2009), 3-6. Andrew Orton, ‘The Diverse and Contested Diaconate: Why Understanding This Ministry is Crucial to the Future of the Church’, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, No. 2, (2012), 260-284.

opportunities associated with this engagement. In exploring deacons' accounts of their own practice, this article argues that much can be learnt from considering how deacons combine different elements of their ministry to make missional connections in an ethical and theologically-reflective way.

## Methods

This article emerged out of a two-year research project conducted with deacons from the Methodist Church in Britain.<sup>2</sup> The research sought to critically explore the nature of contemporary diaconal ministry through an in-depth analysis of different understandings of 'good practice' in the ministry of Methodist deacons. The project employed a participatory methodology that encouraged the involvement of deacons in each phase of the research process. This methodology provided a way to explore diaconal ministry by providing an analytical space for deacons to express what they see themselves doing and why. It also allowed for comparative discussions to emerge, as deacons considered how their own personal experiences and perspectives of diaconal ministry related to the experiences and perspectives of other deacons. Through this process, deacons were naturally encouraged to evaluate the nature of their practice and their overall understanding of the ministry to which they were committed alongside others. They were also invited to critically and theologically reflect on the various accounts of diaconal ministry they described in light of wider research.

The project brought together data generated through the following methods: (a) a literature review of principal texts that provided perspective on the historical, biblical, and theological accounts of diaconal ministry; (b) eighteen individual interviews with key church leaders and authors who helped provide context for the research; (c) participant observation at a wide range of diaconal activities and events in both Methodist and ecumenical settings; and (d) twenty-two group interviews with Methodist deacons.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1) For full details of methods and findings, see: Andrew Orton and Todd Stockdale (forthcoming) *Making Connections: Exploring Methodist Deacons' Perspectives on Contemporary Diaconal Ministry*, Durham: Sacristy Press. 2) In this article, all subsequent references to the 'Methodist Church' refer to the Methodist Church in Britain. Since the Methodist Church locates itself within the wider community of Christians that make up the universal global Church, following common usage, capitalised references to 'the Church' in this article refer to the universal global Church, unless a particular denomination is specified. Conversely, when a local congregation is in mind, the uncapitalised term 'church' will be employed.

<sup>3</sup> 1) With regard to point a): for reasons of space, this article focuses primarily on the empirical findings. However, these empirical findings integrated with wider literature discussions closely, as detailed in the wider publications from the research already cited. 2) With regard to point d): while focusing on the area groups was the main strategy for undertaking the research, in order to make sure that everyone within the Methodist Diaconal Order had an opportunity to contribute, the area group interviews were supplemented by these other observations and also by two interviews conducted with deacons who tended not to engage with their respective area groups. This measure was taken to ensure that the perspectives of the small number of deacons who had largely disengaged from the collective life of the Order were not excluded from this research.

The group interviews played a particularly important role, taking place in the ongoing area group meetings that Methodist deacons participate in as part of their 'Rule of Life'.<sup>4</sup> These area groups involve a range of deacons – including student deacons, probationer deacons, ordained deacons, and 'supernumerary' deacons who are no longer involved in full-time itinerant ministry due to age or illness. Each of the group interviews with these area groups began by asking those deacons present to share a specific instance from their own ministry that they considered to be an example of 'good practice' for a deacon. In the discussion that followed, attention was given to the issues and dilemmas that arose from the everyday experiences of deacons, as well as to the various threads that held these experiences and practices together. In particular, the interviewees were encouraged to reflect upon the different perspectives shared by themselves and their fellow deacons, and to consider how these perspectives might relate to one another.

Both the individual and group interviews were fully transcribed and systematically coded 'line by line' using *NVIVO* qualitative data analysis software. Three different researchers were involved in this analysis process, each working with the data independently – developing coding structures that highlighted the common themes arising from the interview material. Bringing these separate coding structures together into a unified framework confirmed the validity of the initial analysis, and further authenticated the emerging themes common across the data. These emerging themes were then grouped into eight clusters that served as a means for further exploring the data and investigating the connection between the various themes.

The initial findings from this study were reflected back to the Methodist Diaconal Order at their annual Convocation in 2011. Through presentations and discussion groups, the researchers sought to verify and further develop their emerging interpretation of the deacons' perspectives. This phase of the project allowed the researchers to ensure that the views of the deacons had been heard correctly. It also allowed an opportunity for the researchers to further explore with the deacons some of the key issues surfacing through the analysis. This also ensured that every deacon in the Methodist Diaconal Order had an opportunity to contribute her or his perspective to this research. In the sections that follow, the central themes emerging from the accounts given by the deacons about their own practice are presented.

### **Forming Connections: The Purpose and Aims of a Deacon's Ministry**

As deacons reflected on the nature of their work, they frequently noted the wide range of differing contexts and settings across which they ministered. Examples of the various settings where a deacon's work took place included hospitals, prisons, local estates, international airports, private homes, neighbourhood streets, local shops, night shelters, churches, and schools. In many instances, they saw themselves

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<sup>4</sup> Methodist Diaconal Order, 'Rule of Life', <http://methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk/index.php?page=rule-of-life>, last accessed 3 September 2013.

operating on ‘the edges’ of these contexts – existing at the thresholds between the various communities that formed in these settings. Because of their positioning on the edge, or at the threshold, deacons were frequently in the position of forming links or building connections between various individuals and communities that otherwise might not interact.

This idea of forming connections between various groups and individuals quickly emerged as a central theme in the research. In group interviews, deacons repeatedly used phrases such as ‘linking’, ‘making connections’, ‘being a conduit’, ‘networking’, and ‘building bridges’ to describe the nature of their ministry. As the analysis developed, the theme of forming connections surfaced as a key descriptor in answering the question of what deacons’ ministry seeks to do. Although forming connections emerged as the central aim and intention of diaconal ministry, deacons envisioned this activity unfolding in multiple dimensions.

### *Bridging Churches and Communities*

One of the primary ways deacons saw themselves forming connections was through their efforts to build bridges between churches and wider communities. Crucial to these efforts was the deacon’s ability to belong simultaneously to both churches and the communities in the wider society that had no links to these churches. A number of deacons echoed the attitude of one interviewee who suggested that diaconal ministry for her ‘was all about one foot in the world and one foot in the Church’ (Respondent, *Area Group N*). Similarly, another interviewee explained how ‘deacons have been described as having a foot on the pavement and a foot in the porch’, and then suggested that, ‘really, that’s what it’s about’ (Respondent, *Area Group A*).

As the image of a deacon being a bridge between the Church and world emerged, some deacons critiqued this analogy for failing to capture the dynamic nature of their ministry. Specifically, the static nature of a bridge did not seem to accurately portray the way in which deacons authentically belonged to different communities simultaneously, fluidly moving between the two. In developing the analogy further, one deacon sought to show how their ministry in these different communities was unique, yet linked together:

My interpretation of being a deacon is one foot inside the Church pastorally caring for, encouraging, enabling, empowering spiritual growth; that’s through teaching and bringing up the gifts so the people can keep on doing. The other foot within the community sharing the love of God and bringing the needs of the community to the people of the Church. (Respondent, *Area Group P*)

In addition to concerns about the static nature of the bridge analogy, deacons also highlighted the problematic nature of oversimplified models polarizing ‘the Church’ and ‘the world’. Once again, deacons sought to articulate the fluid relationship between these communities that emerged as a result of their ministry. Noting how

deacons position themselves on the edges, one interviewee described the significance of dynamically negotiating between these diverse communities:

I think part of it is about positioning. You know we talk about being on the edge, don't we? And I think for me there is a sense that you are on the edge of church, if you like. You know this looking into and commenting on and representing the world and justice issues and so on and bringing them [into the Church]. But also, [a deacon is involved in] looking out at the world from a church perspective and sharing faith. And there is lots of commenting that needs to go on at the moment about where the Church is and how we do that, you know the gap that has arisen between church and society and there are huge issues. And I think the deacon being placed where he or she is on that edge enables ... there are so many images for deacons, [but] it's the bridge, the building of connections. (Respondent, *Area Group G*)

Thus, through their 'on the edge' positioning, deacons saw themselves playing a crucial role in bringing churches into wider communities. In particular, interviewees spoke of the importance of building meaningful links with those who had no connection to the Church, by caring for them on behalf of the Church. For example:

I never hide who I am and what I'm about but I don't ever push it down people's throats ... but I actually care about them. It's giving them love. One of the things I did in my last appointment was I was chatting to the ambulance station [crew] and I used to go once a week. Very often you'd go in and there were no crews there, [because] they were out. So I always washed up for them. So I went, because you never knew when they'd come back, but they always knew I'd been because all the cups were clean. And they knew I was there on behalf of the Church, because you don't go in [specifically] as a Methodist. So it was about giving them a good experience that the Church cared, God cared, about who they were and the job they did, and they did some pretty awful jobs. ... That was my intent; it wasn't always with words but with actions that I cared about them. (Respondent, *Area Group U*)

In discussing the links formed with those who had no connection to the Church, some deacons stressed the importance of bringing these individuals into the worshipping life of churches through service attendance. For instance, one particular deacon suggested that:

This is something we've got to think about, because whatever we may say about it, our numbers aren't so great and we do need people in. We do have one or two young Mums coming into services and it's really wonderful that they are bringing their children during the church and it's a Tuesday club. It's very lovely that this can be happening. People do like to see that there is some response. (Respondent, *Area Group T*)

Still, a number of other deacons resisted the idea that the effectiveness of their bridging efforts ought to be evaluated based upon the number of people brought into a particular church service. One such deacon insisted that it is 'a learning curve for the Church to accept and acknowledge that just because you are doing something for the community doesn't mean to say that you are going to get all these parents and children into your church' (Respondent, *Area Group R*). Instead, deacons suggested that the focus of their ministry should be about bringing holistic healing to people, regardless of whether or not these individuals expressed a commitment to the Christian faith or attended a particular church service. A deacon who described the complex challenge of ministering to a person who they thought would never be 'what some of us might call a born again Christian' expressed this sentiment clearly:

This isn't about agenda... I wasn't trying to ease her in church on Sunday morning, but [it was] about helping her become a whole human being really. And that's where I think the Church has struggled sometimes, when [the expectation is that] what you do has to translate not only into bums on seats but the 'right-shaped' bums on the seats. And that's the difficult bit. (Respondent, *Area Group Q*)

Although deacons were disinclined to understanding the bridging nature of ministry in terms of getting 'bums on seats', they did recognize the important role their ministry played in removing barriers between churches and those who have not had a positive relationship with the Church in the past. Describing this work as creating 'a soft bridge', one deacon explained:

Some of those people I found who said 'I don't do church', [to which] I say 'That's fine; I'm not here to talk church.' And I think that for me is diaconal ministry, that is at the heart of my diaconal ministry, is actually meeting people who are outside of the Church who sometimes actually feel completely ... not against the Church, but disenfranchised, they don't feel that the Church has anything to offer them. A lot of people get hurt by the Church. And I see sometimes what deacons do is create a soft bridge, the beginnings... the footings of a bridge for a person to start making their way back towards or to church where they have never ever been. And that for me is strongly diaconal ministry. (Respondent, *Area Group R*)

Crucial to creating these soft bridges was the preparatory work deacons undertook in positively representing the Church in wider contexts – creating constructive encounters between churches and those with no connection to God or to the Church. Still, as deacons reflected on the nature of their ministry, they indicated that their bridging role was not simply about representing the Church in wider contexts, but was also about bringing issues and concerns from these wider contexts back into the Church. One deacon, drawing upon her ordination promises, spoke of the importance of '[holding] before God's people the needs of the world' (Respondent, *Area Group A*). In describing her ministry with sex workers, this deacon noted how

bringing the stories of these women back into a largely middle-class church, 'enabled this community to see things differently.' Through bringing these concerns to the community, this deacon suggested that 'the girls [are now] being known to them', and the needs of the wider community are now being held before this church.

This practice of bringing the voices of those outside the Church into the Church has, at times, placed deacons in an awkward position – particularly when those voices had unpalatable things to say to the Church. Often this form of representation would result in the deacon functioning in the role of community agitators. One deacon in particular suggested that this was a crucial aspect of a deacon's ministry, saying 'as deacon, I was told that we are the irritant of the Church; we are that little bit of grit that the pearl grows round and our job is to irritate the Church' (Respondent, *Area Group T*). Even though deacons stressed that it was important to 'irritate in a loving way, not irritate in an unpleasant way', the challenges that deacons brought to churches through the voice of the outsider had the potential to place deacons in precarious situations – where they found themselves at odds with church leaders and members for upsetting the status quo.

#### *Forming Connections within Churches*

Because deacons saw their ministry existing 'on the edges' of various contexts, they remained sensitive to the needs of those positioned on the margins of these settings. Thus, when ministering within churches, deacons often found themselves seeking to form connections with those who, although belonging to these communities, were isolated or disconnected from them in some way. This particular aspect of a deacon's ministry was described well by one interviewee who explained:

When I said those on the margins in society, I would certainly also want to underline that every church I've ever been there are those on the margins of any church and within the Church, and they are not always the same people. In one church it might be young people, another church it might be the old people, in other churches it might [be another group]...but somewhere or other, ... it's [ministering to] those on those margins. (Respondent, *Area Group H*)

As another deacon expressed it, by focusing their ministry efforts around those on the margins, vital connections were formed with those within the Church 'who have been forgotten by the Church' (Respondent, *Area Group L*). These include those who have 'not been to church for years because they can't go' and those who have 'just slid off the end'. According to this interviewee, 'as deacons we tend to pick up the people who slide off the end, if you like'. Examples of those who have 'slid off the end' included housebound members of churches, and deacons sought to form connections between them and the worship of the church by bringing extended communion to their homes.

Deacons also believed that they had a particular responsibility to locate the individuals and groups within a church community who had previously been

ignored or excluded, and then develop ministry efforts within the congregation designed to respond to their needs. An example of this comes from one deacon who established a pastoral visitation system within a congregation that ensured that someone from within the ministerial team regularly engaged those who were sick or hospitalized.

Not only did deacons seek to form connections between themselves and those on the margins of the Church, but they also sought to link together disassociated groups and individuals already participating in the on-going life of the Church. For instance, one deacon described the way in which she identified the various mid-week activities taking place in a particular church – working then to create opportunities for those involved in these activities to meaningfully connect with one another. Another deacon undertook a similar activity; only this particular piece of work took place across a Circuit instead of just within a particular congregation.<sup>5</sup> In describing the linking nature of diaconal work, this deacon spoke of the dynamic impact that occurred by drawing together various individuals working in different churches:

I'm involved in four churches but seeing the overall picture of younger people, (when I say young I'm talking about maybe in their 30s), they are perhaps working isolated in their own churches. They are very committed to their own churches, but find that they are not always able to use their gifts or their skills and are put down... [As a deacon, I've been involved in] bringing them together, networking people, then giving them the opportunity to see that there are other likeminded [people] and others in their age group within our section of the Circuit anyway. And seeing them just blossom and grow with their gifts and coming together for fellowship; not to get them to leave their churches, but to encourage them in fellowship with one another, and then gifts have started to come out ... It's just seeing them blossom and having the time to see the bigger picture and networking and pulling them together and getting them to meet. (Respondent, *Area Group M*)

Importantly, the links that deacons formed between individuals already participating in the life of the Church also took place on an inter-denominational level. Indeed, deacons saw their ministry as having a strong ecumenical component, and regularly spoke of the importance of building connections across different churches in a local community. One deacon in particular, who was working on a local housing estate that did not have a church building in the area, described the ways in which a deacon's ministry can connect Christians in that particular place to respond to the needs present:

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<sup>5</sup> In the organizational structure of the Methodist Church in Britain, local congregations are grouped together in a 'Circuit', which is served by a team that may include presbyters, deacons, local preachers, and lay workers. A superintendent minister oversees the Circuit, where the Methodist Church, through a 'stationing process', matches presbyters and deacons to vacant positions.



I found my role listening to the Christians who are already living there and what they have already perceived God doing in that area. But because they've not been linked up, because they are from different denominations, [it's been] my role joining up the different Christians from different places so they can hear each other's ideas of what God is doing in that community. ... Some of those visions have been very similar and have overlapped considerably so I've been in a place where I can kind of draw that together, so together we can discern the whole vision for that community as it continues to grow. (Respondent, *Area Group J*)

Thus, through this linking together of different Christians from different places, deacons sought to galvanize the missional efforts of the Church, in service to the local area.

#### *Establishing Links within Local Communities*

Just as deacons saw their specific ministry within the Church as forming connections and linking together those experiencing isolation within these communities, they also articulated a parallel aim for their ministry in the wider community. Indeed, deacons spoke regularly about creating connections with those on the 'margins of society', and about their efforts to establish connections with those experiencing isolation within this context. For instance, one deacon commented that a deacon's ministry is 'about the Church working with those on the margins of society... giving a bit of affirmation and support to individuals who perhaps ... are the most vulnerable we've got' (Respondent, *Area Group H*). Another deacon, after describing a particular piece of work with mental health patients noted that it was 'very diaconal because it is seeking the people who are forgotten about' (Respondent, *Area Group O*).

Yet the connections built through deacons' ministries in the wider community went beyond the relationships formed between themselves and those resting on the margins of these communities, and included the formation of dynamic links between various organizations in these settings. In describing the bridging nature of their ministry, deacons spoke of how their work involved setting up multi-agency forums that linked together different organizations and voluntary groups in efforts to better respond to the emerging needs of a local community. Examples of this type of work included bringing together a collection of agencies that had each separately encountered human trafficking victims in order to develop a shared response to this need; and linking together a number of churches and agencies in order to establish a Street Pastors initiative for the local community. Through instances such as these, deacons stressed the way in which they acted as community hubs mobilizing responses to area needs by linking together various state agencies, community workers, and charities. Importantly, it was the deacon's diverse relationships with the members of these organizations, as well as their sensitivity to the needs across their community that enable these catalytic connections to be formed.

## Process of Good Practice: How Deacons Realise their Aims

Thus far, this article has focused on the purposes of a deacon's ministry. A careful listening to deacons' descriptions of their own practice has revealed that deacons saw the specific aims of their ministry as forming connections with a wide range of individual and groups, both within and outside the Christian community. This careful listening to deacon's descriptions also revealed something else about deacons – namely, the integrated nature of their ministry. In analysing the data, it became clear that *how* deacons went about doing their work was just as much an essential part of their ministry as the aims they sought to achieve. In the sections that follow, this article takes up the particular processes that deacons undertook in realising their aims – exploring how the related themes of 'presence', 'service', 'discernment' and 'witness' surfaced as key descriptors of good practice.

### *Presence*

In describing the nature of good practice in their ministry, deacons placed a notable emphasis on the importance of *presence*. This particular theme quickly emerged as a key concept in understanding how deacons view the work in which they are involved. In explaining the fundamental aspects of their ministry, deacons repeatedly employed phrases such as 'being there', 'coming alongside', 'being available', 'being with', 'listening', 'talking' and 'building relationships'.

This theme of presence occurred in every area group discussion, and the above aspects of 'being available' or 'coming alongside' formed the fundamental starting place for a deacon's ministry. By seeking out and actively developing connections with people – in whatever situation they found themselves in – deacons envisioned the nature of their ministry as being principally relational. In fact, one deacon noted how 'the relationships have to be there first' (Respondent, *Area Group B*). Similarly another deacon shared how their work is 'about relationship and building relationships' (Respondent, *Area Group M*). Indeed, building these relationships was seen as an indispensable aspect of a deacon's ministry, and represented a key component for transformative experiences. As one interviewee noted, 'It's been crucial for me to be alongside people and to be building relationships with people' (Respondent, *Area Group N*). Another deacon suggested 'there is something beautiful about human relationship and that for me is about where the transformation takes place' (Respondent, *Area Group A*).

Because deacons saw human relationships as an indispensable aspect of their ministry, they sought to create spaces where connections between themselves and others could naturally develop. In the context of relationship building, a deacon's presence, availability, and time were critical. Deacons possessed a multifaceted understanding of their time and presence, and developed a number of strategies for effectively employing these elements in their practice. First, deacons recognized that the time and availability they had resulted from them being 'freed-up' from other vocational responsibilities by the Church. Because they had been enabled by the Methodist Church to work in this way, deacons had the time needed to be present

with people in order to build up meaningful relationships. Deacons took full advantage of this freed-up time, and not only did it allow for them to assume a posture of ‘an openness to people’, but it also provided opportunities for deacons ‘to seek out’ those in need. In fact, as one deacon suggested, their ministry to others was ‘not just wait for them to come to you, [it was] go and look for them – the lost and the lonely’ (Respondent, *Area Group T*).

A second set of strategies used by deacons in building relationships involved creating times and spaces for *other* people to linger. When describing their ministry, deacons stressed the importance of creating safe spaces for people to interact with themselves and with each other. For instance, one deacon spoke of how her involvement in developing an art group had helped to facilitate this:

An example of being available... to enable and facilitate something I feel is still growing is [an art group we’ve started]. I’d like to define it as creating safe space for people to be creative and for those others who volunteer to be Christ [in] getting alongside people. It’s been running for over a year now. (Respondent, *Area Group U*)

In a similar manner, another deacon spoke of how she used her manse as a place for those on a local estate to gather:

I was asked to live here. This was not what I chose or somewhere within the community development, but I thought, “well, this a substantial house, how can we use it?” So to provide the space for people to gather in small groups, and be confident enough to do that, with exploring their own way of being in the world through creativity – to a lesser or greater extent. And it’s just an absolute gift and privilege to be able to have this space, the physical space, as a deacon to be able to do that. And it seems so natural to provide a peaceful place and comfortable place with some food and just to be. (Respondent, *Area Group S*)

As deacons reflected upon these aspects of time and presence, they noted how the nature of their practice often raised questions about what it was that deacons actually did with their time when they were present. Specifically, deacons mentioned how others perceived that they did not really do anything except being present. In spite of these perceptions, the research revealed that deacons actually possessed a vivid sense of what their presence was about. For instance, one deacon responded: ‘we talk about presence, but it’s presence as a deacon, not just any old presence, but it’s presence as a deacon and representative of the Church’ (Respondent, *Area Group E*).

This means that deacons saw themselves taking up a particular position through their presence – a position that distinguishes themselves and the ministerial nature of the time they spend with others. For example, one deacon, when describing her ministry to those addicted to alcohol, emphasized that she did not ‘sit alongside

them as another alcoholic. I sit alongside them as [one] who is a deacon in the Methodist Church. So I don't have a neutral stance' (Respondent, *Area Group A*). Another interviewee described the ministerial nature of a deacon's presence, noting the importance of taking time and being present in a chaplaincy setting:

I think that this is very, very important to all of us. It's very easy to get caught up in 'what do you do, how are you filling in your time, are you at a meeting, are you doing this, this, this and this' and it's not about that. It's being available and quite often people may think that you are wasting your time. You know they might think 'what's she doing there having a cup of coffee and just ... she's not doing anything!' And they kind of don't get it that that's what it's about, it's being available for people and listening and that's what it's about. One of the things that I do is going to Sainsbury's as their Chaplain and sometimes I wander around and the staff are all busy, you know they are all at the checkouts, but as I wander around I can be lifting them to God in prayer and when they have got a quiet moment I can just come alongside and see how their day is going. (Respondent, *Area Group U*)

By noting the pastoral opportunities that arose from time spent with others, deacons gave clear indication that they saw ministerial purposes resting behind their presence. Yet, deacons also stressed how these opportunities were a part of a process that often developed over a long period of time. Thus, deacons emphasized that their presence was not conditioned upon an immediate response from those they encountered. Instead, deacons spoke of 'planting seeds' through their presence, and seeing these seeds grow and bear fruit in the form of opportunities to minister.

The emphasis that deacons placed on the unconditional nature of their availability underscored the crucial role that presence played in a deacon's understanding of good practice. Still, as fundamental as presence was to a deacon's understanding of good practice, it was not the sole means by which deacons achieved their aims. Analysis revealed how other aspects of a deacon's ministry also significantly contributed, and it is to these themes that this article will now turn.

### *Service*

In addition to *presence*, the idea of *service* also emerged as a central thread in deacons' understanding of good practice – surfacing as a prominent theme in every area group interview. The emergence of this theme was not a surprise, as the Methodist Church in Britain commonly describes a deacon's ministry in terms of service. For instance, in the ecclesial document entitled *What is a Deacon?* (Section 3.3), the Church indicates that the role of a deacon is to focus the service ministry of the Church.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when deacons spoke of their practice in interviews, it was expected

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<sup>6</sup> Methodist Church in Britain, *What is a Deacon?*, (2004) available at: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/879666/dev-perwhat-is-a-deacon-2004-15062012.pdf>, last accessed 3 September 2013.

that they would use the language of ‘service’ or ‘serving’ to describe the nature of their ministry.

Examples of the way in which service was emphasized in deacons’ understanding of their practice were plentiful. As they described their ministry, deacons frequently shared examples of encounters with others that involved a response to a need or caring for someone on the margins. One interviewee suggested that the work deacons are involved in offers ‘love and care’ to people, particularly ‘caring about those that perhaps other people don’t care about’ (Respondent, *Area Group U*). Another deacon responded that good practice in diaconal ministry was about asking ‘what does it mean to be a servant in this place?’ (Respondent, *Area Group M*). A third deacon, after describing a particular ministry situation in which she had been involved, was asked why she believed this activity to be diaconal. She answered ‘well, because it’s service!’ (Respondent, *Area Group G*).

As deacons considered the role of service in their work, they recognized both responsive and proactive dimensions of their activity. When describing the nature of their ministry, some deacons emphasized the importance of being available to respond to needs as they are presented to them. Other deacons, drawing on a key phrase from their ordination promises, noted the importance of actively ‘seeking out the lost and the lonely’. For instance, one interviewee suggested that a deacon’s ministry is ‘about looking and seeing and searching and being able to say “Yes, I’ll do that!”’ (Respondent, *Area Group A*).

Similar to the idea of presence, deacons saw their service as something to be offered unconditionally. Thus, deacons believed that they were to respond to needs in practical ways, even if this meant they did not directly speak the Gospel in these situations. Still, the way in which deacons interpreted their service revealed that they saw a vital spiritual dimension to their activity – embodying and enacting the Gospel in concrete forms through their service. One deacon described this embodiment by saying:

It’s about meeting a need where it is and it’s an embodiment of putting oil on somebody’s head when you greet them, feeding them when they are hungry, visiting them, washing them, do you know what I mean? So it’s an embodiment of that Gospel imperative to serve where needed, and there is need there. (Respondent, *Area Group L*)

Another interviewee, again drawing upon the ordination promises made by deacons, spoke of how the Gospel relates to these practical acts of service:

Whether it be in the workplace, whether it be in older people’s homes or behind closed doors in private homes where people are struggling, you know it’s the need aspect, it’s the seeking out the lost and the lonely, and approaching that in practical ways that’s completely underpinned by the Gospel and prayer. (Respondent, *Area Group T*)

As deacons further reflected on the nature of their service, they drew distinctions between being a servant and ‘being a doormat’ – suggesting that their idea of service should not be conflated with servility. In making these distinctions, deacons would draw upon the example of Jesus who modelled for them not only humility in service, but also a willingness to speak up and bring a prophetic challenge to a situation when necessary.

### *Discernment*

A third theme to emerge out of deacons’ descriptions of good practice was *discernment*. While presence and service remained the primary themes associated with a deacon’s ministry, the need for discernment clearly surfaced alongside these aspects, appearing as a theme in twenty of the twenty-two area groups.

As deacons spoke about the way in which they carried out their work, they noted the importance of discerning where God might be moving in particular circumstances. Indeed, as one deacon suggested, good practice for a deacon involved ‘interpreting where God is in every situation (Respondent, *Area Group U*). Seeing the ways that God might be working in specific settings was a crucial aspect of a deacon’s ministry, because it enabled them to alert congregations and individuals to God’s presence and activity. For instance, one interviewee suggested that deacons must direct people beyond the human elements in a given situation, and ‘to point out and say “well actually, can you track God in this?”’ (Respondent, *Area Group B*). Through this discerning practice, deacons saw their work as inviting others to come alongside and participate in the work that God was already doing in a situation.

When deacons spoke of the importance of discernment in good practice, they described their ministry as one that helped open the eyes of others to see the bigger picture of God moving. One deacon described this process as ‘joining the dots’, saying:

I find it really exciting to almost step back and try to see the bigger picture and I call it ‘joining at the dots’, because you see where God is at work. And I always find it interesting that I point it out to people and they’ve never seen it. But once you alert them to it, then they can see that progression going on. (Respondent, *Area Group B*)

Looking at the bigger picture and attempting to trace where God was at work in a situation brought a strong missional dimension to a deacon’s practice. Specifically, deacons spoke of the importance of seeing where God was already working, and then highlighting these situations as opportunities for churches to participate. Thus, deacons suggested that one aspect of their ministry was to come alongside those who, although not members of churches, were nevertheless engaged in work that was redemptive and restorative in nature. In describing this activity, deacons would often emphasize the way in which this stressed the kingdom nature of their practice. For instance, one deacon suggested:

I've always sort of seen my role as trying to be part of those that are building the Kingdom community... that there are those out there who are not necessarily part of the Church but that I'm out there trying with them in a sort of humble way really, because at times they shame me in terms of what they do to try and feel my way towards what the Kingdom is out there, and the Kingdom is already out there.... But I think I always see it in a slightly wider way in that how we enable people to understand what it is to be part of the Kingdom community, or they are already that and how we raise their awareness to what's already going on out there. (Respondent, *Area Group T*)

Being able to see where God is at work in a given situation required a high degree of discernment for deacons. Likewise, a measure of discernment was also needed in understanding how and where the Church could engage in these situations. Yet through this discernment a deacon's ministry was able to help others see where God was present in specific settings, and identify opportunities for Christians to join with God in this work.

#### *Witness*

As the analysis around the nature of good practice in a deacon's ministry continued, a fourth theme – the theme of *witness* – began to progressively emerge out of the data. Although the occurrence of this theme was less prevalent than the others, witness still appeared in sixteen of the twenty-two area group interviews. When giving a description of their work deacons relayed instances of 'trying to get into conversations [about God]', 'being witnesses to Christ', 'sharing and talking about Jesus', and 'trying to be Christ in the world'.

Although deacons recognized the significance of witness in their ministry, they stressed the importance of communicating the Gospel in a variety of creative and imaginative ways. This would include giving verbal articulations of the Gospel, as well as displaying the Gospel through their actions. One interviewee captured well the diversity of expression attempted by deacons saying:

I think we're all called, like everybody is called, to communicate the gospel. Once you've received that salvation, that's the thing that comes with it... there's that urge to tell folk. So we're all called to that, and we've all got our distinctive way of doing it, but again, maybe there's something about diaconal ministry... I particular think that diaconal ministry is called to communicate that in as diverse number of ways as possible. (Respondent, *Area Group F*)

Importantly, the way in which deacons spoke of witness further revealed the inter-related nature of their practice. For instance, the accounts of witness shared by deacons frequently connected this activity with the themes of presence, service, or discernment described above. In deacons' understanding of their ministry, these

latter elements created the environment whereby the Gospel could be seen or heard. One deacon gave an example of this interconnectivity, suggesting that she 'had spent time drinking copious amounts of coffee and digging soil, not physically, but digging over metaphorical soil and planting seeds and slowly dripping bits of gospel stuff in' (Respondent, *Area Group B*). Another deacon described the link between presence and witness in a chaplaincy setting saying:

It's not about dashing around sticking plasters on things, because plasters fall off. So I mean somebody once said about chaplaincy that presence precedes proclamation. So it's done week after week, month after month, year after year sometimes. And then you might just have that one conversation that will make a phenomenal difference in that person's life. So in all our coming alongside people, we have to go the extra mile and we have to be prepared to be there, just go on doing it and then they might say 'why do you do this?', 'well actually because...' And there's your opening to talk about things deeper. But in the meantime you are trying to enter into their pain to a certain extent and make something of it, hopefully help their pain to be transformed into something positive but it's all in a long time, it's not a quick fix, absolutely not. And it's taking their pain. (Respondent, *Area Group A*)

As the above quote suggests, this process of witness often unfolded gradually over time. An example of this can be seen in the 'hints of God conversations' emerging out of the art group that was described in the above section on presence. The deacons involved in this activity explained:

[The group has] been running for over a year now.... We are open for teas, coffees, biscuits and people use it as they will,... sitting round the table in a sort of a circle and telling jokes and having a laugh and singing songs while we are painting. ... We're just starting to make real connections and we are enjoying being there together... There are hints of God conversations, which are good because somebody connects slightly with the churches around, so it's just a work in progress. (Respondent *Area Group U*)

Alongside presence, discernment also played a role in a deacon's witness. As deacons developed relationships with people in vulnerable situations, they would engage in a complex process of discerning and negotiating when and how it was ethically appropriate to enter into conversations about God. An example of this discernment and negotiation can be seen in an encounter one deacon had with someone who was sensing 'a presence', but had not yet recognized that presence as God. For this deacon, in this situation, witness was about:

trying to get into those conversations to try and understand where they are coming from and being where they are and trying to help them understand what that presence is, but not sort of going in with the God



thing straight away, because you can't, can you? (Respondent, *Area Group A*)

Thus, through conversations such as these – developing out of relationships built through a deacon's presence and service – deacons found opportunities to model and share their faith in diverse and creative ways.

#### *Enabling, Encouraging, and Equipping*

As the analysis surrounding how deacons go about realising the aims of their ministry developed a fifth theme emerged alongside presence, service, discernment and witness. As deacons described the way in which they carried out their work, it became clear that, in their understanding, diaconal ministry was not something exclusive to deacons. Indeed, the accounts of good practice given by deacons revealed how they sought to involve others in their work. Described by one interviewee as 'all the E words', deacons sought to *enable, encourage, and equip* others to be involved in diaconal ministry. This theme was decidedly present in the data, arising in all but one of the area group interviews.

Instead of seeing themselves as being solely responsible for responding to needs in churches and communities, deacons stressed that all members of the Church should share in this responsibly. Indeed, deacons emphasized how all of God's people – including deacons, presbyters, and lay people – are called to live a life of service. Thus, deacons recognized that a crucial element of their ministry was to encourage and enable those within the Church to be involved in diaconal ministry. For example, one interviewee noted how a deacon's ministry was actually about, 'taking the needs of the world into the church community and encouraging them to address them themselves rather than thinking, "well we've got a deacon, so the deacon can do this"' (Respondent, *Area Group T*).

Since a deacon's work included these elements of encouraging and enabling diaconal ministry amongst the whole people of God, interviewees suggested that a prime marker of good practice was when churches would take on board specific needs, and continue to respond to them even when deacons were not present. In fact, as deacons described projects in which they had been involved, one of the measures for success was how well the project continued after the deacons own personal involvement had ceased. For example, one interviewee suggested that a key part a deacon's ministry involved 'taking people with you once you've identified where the needs are'. For this deacon, it was important to bring 'the church congregation, with you, to address that need so that you make yourself in a way redundant, because they then take it on board and continue it' (Respondent, *Area Group T*).

Importantly, the continuation of a piece of diaconal work was not the only measure of success, as deacons also shared of instances where they helped some ministries end gracefully, so that others could emerge in their place. Still, where it was appropriate for a particular project to continue, it showed how good practice in a

deacon's ministry involved enabling and equipping others to participate in service ministries that went beyond a deacon and a deacon's own work.

### **Conclusion**

By carefully listening to deacons' understandings of their practice, clear themes emerged around the purposes and processes of a deacon's ministry. Through the processes of presence, service, discernment and witness deacons formed a wide range of connections between diverse individuals and groups. By fusing together these processes in forming relationships – and by enabling others to participate alongside them – deacons brought the Gospel to life in imaginative ways. There is much to be learned by exploring the way in which deacons brought these different elements together in their practice. Reflection on the experiences and narratives of these deacons, in the context of the wider literature on the diaconate, invites Christian communities into a renewed consideration of some of the more pressing issues faced by the Church today. Indeed, the richly diverse experiences of deacons, in conversation with wider Church understandings, provide a vital setting for exploring the challenges and opportunities Christian communities face in living out their mission in the contemporary context.

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