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## The diverse and contested diaconate: Why understanding this ministry is crucial to the future of the Church

**Abstract:** The diaconate has attracted widespread renewed interest in the contemporary context, whilst being the focus of considerable international ecumenical, social and theological debate. This article shows how the deacon's role embodies many of the pressing issues facing churches across the world today, particularly through its position as a ministry at the interface between church and wider society. These issues include debates over the nature of ministry, the relationship between different lay and ordained ministries, issues of gender, status and power, and how churches should relate to wider society. To explore these issues, the article draws on research into the diaconate in one particular denomination, the Methodist Church in Britain, and sets this in a wider comparative ecumenical and historical context. The resulting analysis shows how it is crucially important for churches to reflect internationally on diverse experiences and understandings of deacons' ministry, and own collectively the inherent challenges that this ministry can present. Deacons are shown to have a liminal ministry that through its very existence and practice can challenge understandings of status and power that can exist between different groups such as those who are lay and ordained, those in the church and those in the wider community. Reflecting on this liminal ministry can help churches as they seek to make connections between worship, mission and service, by enabling the whole Church to put their faith into practice in their everyday lives as they engage with wider society. This is especially important in terms of reflecting carefully on the Church's response to those who are suffering, disadvantaged or marginalised.

**Zusammenfassung:** Das Diakonat erfreut sich gegenwärtig wieder einem breiten Interesse und steht im Zentrum ökumenischer, sozialer und theologischer Debatten. Dieser Beitrag zeigt, inwieweit viele der derzeitigen Probleme der Kirche in der Rolle des Diakons in besonderer Weise sichtbar werden, besonders aufgrund seiner Stellung zwischen Kirche und Gesellschaft. Der Artikel untersucht das Diakonat der Methodist Church of Great Britain und analysiert dieses in einen breiteren vergleichenden ökumenischen und historischen Zusammenhang. Am Ende steht das Ergebnis, dass es für Kirchen von höchster Wichtigkeit ist, die verschiedenen Erfahrungen und Verständnisse von diakonischem Amt zu beden-

ken und gemeinsam die diesem Amt innewohnenden Herausforderungen anzugehen.

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## Introduction

Across the world, churches face challenging times as they seek to live out lives of Christian faith within diverse contexts, where the relationship between the Church and the wider world has come under increasing scrutiny. Arguably at the heart of these international challenges are pressing questions concerning how the Church understands its mission in ways that enable the making of improved connections between the Christian faith, churches, and wider communities. Central to such debates are questions such as how these understandings of mission relate to the respective ministries of those who belong to the Church.<sup>1</sup> These questions can be set within broader questions such as how *all* Christians (whether lay or ordained) might be enabled to participate within God's mission as they seek to live out their lives authentically as Christians.<sup>2</sup>

One role that has received particular attention within these crucial debates has been the role of the deacon, as this form of ministry has experienced a remarkable resurgence in interest in many different contexts across the world. However, this role has also proved particularly controversial, sparking wide-ranging debates both within individual denominations and between them in wider ecumenical discussions.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the deceptively-simple question "What is a deacon?" has generated surprisingly diverse responses within different churches at different times and in different places. These responses have also been in a state of flux, as Christians across the world have wrestled with growing understandings of this ministry; as Avis states:

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1 See, for example, the discussion in: Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped By Mission*, London (T&T Clark International) 2005.

2 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York (Orbis Books) 1991, especially 467–474.

3 This is particularly apparent, for example, in: World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111, Geneva (World Council of Churches), 1982.

The diaconate is at the same time the most problematic and the most promising of all the ministries of the Church. Some churches have been agonising about what a deacon *is*, while others have begun to discover what a deacon *can be*.<sup>4</sup>

This article will argue that practical theological reflection on particular denominational understandings of the deacon's ministry in an international and ecumenical context provides a helpful way of exploring why this role has been so controversial. Starting by using one recent denominational study, the article will then begin to show how critically examining this ministry in particular contexts can be illuminating. Indeed, doing so may help to improve our understanding of some key underlying questions which are central to the life and purpose of the Church in wider society, touching on the heart of this relationship on which the Church's future depends. In particular, three underlying issues arising in this work are explored which have particular salience if the Church is to be enabled to respond to contemporary challenges and participate fully in *Missio Dei*, namely:

1. How all Christians might be enabled by the Church to live out their faith with integrity by expressing *diakonia* in their everyday lives.
2. How different understandings about how the Bible and Christian faith are understood might be applied to contemporary ministry, especially over controversial issues such as the relationship between gender and ministry.
3. How the Church listens to, engages with and responds to people in wider society, especially those who are marginalised, in ways that reflect the Gospel.

In embodying the controversies surrounding such issues in ways that this article will explore, expressions of diaconal ministry can highlight them through their very being. Indeed, the resurgence of interest in forms of the diaconate within the contemporary context may be seen as having arisen in response to issues such as these. The resulting experiences can also be seen as embodying and bringing to the surface many of the critical controversies that churches face in responding to these challenges. By exploring the ways that these differences and contestations are interconnected with each other, and embedded in the context in which they have arisen within one particular context, the potential significance of understanding the diaconate for the future of the church will be demonstrated. Indeed,

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Avis, *Wrestling with the Diaconate*, in: *Ecclesiology* 5, 2009, 3–6 (Italics as in original), here 3.

it may be that in bringing such crucial issues to the fore, the diaconate was created ‘for such a time as this’.<sup>5</sup>

This article seeks to model, through the example of one particular denominational case study, a process of reflecting on questions raised about the deacon’s role relating to such issues within a particular denomination. Through this process, the article will show how such a process of practical theological reflection can generate important wider learning about these issues when set in a wider international context. The article arose out of a two year research project carried out between 2009 and 2011 that critically explored ‘Good Practice in Diaconal Ministry’ in the Methodist Church in Britain.<sup>6</sup> The research used a participative approach designed to generate collective learning by stimulating critical reflection on deacons’ experiences. The research was conducted primarily through group interviews with deacons from this denomination in their area groups across England and Wales. This approach was supported by a wide range of participant observations of deacons when they met together on other occasions, and a limited number of individual interviews with key related stakeholders from the wider Church.<sup>7</sup> Underlying the approach was an adapted combination of Swinton and Mowat’s methodological rationale for qualitative research in practical theology and Cameron et al’s approach to practical theological action research.<sup>8</sup>

This research was set in a wider comparative context through a literature review, attending ecumenical discussions and participating in related conferences such as the *Diakonia Region Africa-Europe* conference held in Tanzania in

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5 Renewed Diaconate Working Party of the House of Bishops, *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*, London (Church House Publishing) 2001.

6 This project was carried out by the author through a partnership between the Wesley Study Centre and Durham University, with funding from this denomination. For ease of style, all references to the Methodist Church, Methodist Conference, Methodist deacons or British Methodism from here onwards in this article refer to this particular denomination unless specifically stated otherwise. For clarity, it is worth noting there are a range of forms of Methodism in Britain, of which the Methodist Church in Britain is the largest. There are also other Methodist Churches globally who do not necessarily share the particular approach to the diaconate taken by the Methodist Church in Britain.

7 Full details of methods and the methodological rationale for the approach taken by the project will be available in the project report, ‘Making Connections: Exploring Methodist Deacons’ Perspectives on Contemporary Diaconal Ministry’, due to be published in collaboration with the Methodist Church in Britain in the coming year.

8 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London (SCM Press) 2006; Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Claire Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, London (SCM Press) 2010.

July 2011.<sup>9</sup> This comparative dimension was developed further through organising an ecumenical conference entitled *'Making Connections: Exploring Diaconal Ministry'*, held in Durham in September 2011. Adopting a case study methodology enables an in-depth exploration of the ways in which key contestations about the nature of the diaconate are interconnected with each other, and embedded within the particular context in which they have arisen in a particular case.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, this methodology enables this case to be set alongside others in the broader ecumenical and international context, allowing for experiences to be critically compared, and issues of broader significance to be critically analysed.

To do this, this article now begins by outlining the current understanding of the diaconate within the Methodist Church in Britain, and summarises some of the significant historical issues that have affected the way that this has developed. The article then explores how historical and current practice in the diaconate in the Methodist Church in Britain may be seen as reflecting the crucial but controversial issues outlined above. By setting these experiences within broader ecumenical and international understandings of the diaconate, the diaconate's symbolic and practical contribution to addressing these issues is considered. The liminal nature of this role as experienced within the Methodist Church in Britain, and reflected differently in other denominations, is explored as being central to its ability to form connections that do this in this context.

## The Methodist Diaconal Order in Great Britain

A deacon's primary purpose is understood by the Methodist Church in Britain to be to provide a focus for the 'servant ministry' of the whole church, providing witness through service in ways that represent, model and enable this ministry in the Church and wider community.<sup>11</sup> The ordination promises made by these deacons commit them in God's name:

to assist God's people in worship and prayer;  
to hold before them the needs and concerns of the world;  
to minister Christ's love and compassion;

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**9** Diakonia Region Africa-Europe is one of three regional groups which make up the Diakonia World Federation (World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities), discussed in further detail later in this article.

**10** For further methodological rationale regarding general case study approaches, see Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, London (Sage) 1995.

**11** Methodist Church in Britain, *What is a Deacon?*, 2004, (retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> June 2010, from: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co\\_what\\_is\\_a\\_deacon0704.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co_what_is_a_deacon0704.doc)).

to visit and support the sick and the suffering;  
 to seek out the lost and the lonely;  
 and to help those you serve to offer their lives to God.  
 Fulfil your calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.  
 In all things, give counsel and encouragement to all whom Christ entrusts to your care.  
 Pray without ceasing.  
 Work with joy in the Lord's service.  
 Let no one suffer hurt through your neglect.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1998, both men and women have been able to become Methodist deacons in Britain, becoming ordained to a full time, life-long order of ministry dedicated to this purpose, whilst simultaneously becoming part of a dispersed religious order (the Methodist Diaconal Order). Those belonging to this Order make themselves available to be sent (through a 'stationing' process) to locally-funded positions wherever the national Methodist Church ('the Connexion') wishes to send them. These positions are usually formed as part of a ministry team within a group of local Methodist churches ('a Circuit'). As part of their status of being ministers within the Methodist Church, they receive a stipend and housing on terms which are now the same as those of the other order of ministry (presbyters) recognised within this church.

## The development of the Methodist Diaconal Order in a historical context

This particular contemporary denominational understanding of deacons' ministry has emerged over a considerable period of time, during which there has been considerable debate over the form it should take, both within this denomination and more widely. Indeed, there is substantial historical evidence that this ministry was seen as highly contentious ever since its origins in the early Church.<sup>13</sup> The resulting clashes arguably contributed towards the relative abeyance (or even suppression) of this role for much of the Church's history.<sup>14</sup> This makes the resurgence of cross-denominational interest in the diaconate that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution, and particularly recently, all the more remark-

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<sup>12</sup> Methodist Church in Britain, *The Methodist Worship Book*, Peterborough (Methodist Publishing House) 1999, 317.

<sup>13</sup> James M. Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*, New York (Seabury) 1981.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; Ron O'Toole, *The Diaconate within the Roman Catholic Church in: Christine Hall (ed.) The Deacon's Ministry*, Leominster (Gracewing) 1992, 175–190.

able. Why have increasing numbers of Christians and churches sought to reclaim this Biblically-rooted ministry within this more recent social context?

The particular British Methodist experience of the diaconate emerged (like many renewed diaconal movements) from the early experiments in the nineteenth century of Christians seeking to respond to the changed social and economic circumstances of these times.<sup>15</sup> The early deaconess movements in British Methodism provided single Christian women with opportunities to respond to the pressing social and spiritual needs of the day.<sup>16</sup> This ultimately led to the establishment of a combined Wesley Deaconess Order, the precursor to the current Methodist Diaconal Order.<sup>17</sup> Even in these early days, the work the deaconesses were ‘set apart’ to do was hugely varied, with a report on the work of deaconesses to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in 1902–3 listing a wide range of roles. These included being “a Church Deaconess, aiding in the Pastoral Work of a great congregation”; “a Mission Deaconess”; “a Deaconess Evangelist”; “a Deaconess-Nurse”; “a Deaconess-Teacher”; “a Slum-Deaconess”; a “trusted friend, and humanly speaking, the saviour of women who are lost in the midst of wealth and fashion”; a Deaconess engaged in “Rescue work for women or the prisoner” (e.g. responding to poverty and alcohol addiction); and “a Foreign Missionary Deaconess”.<sup>18</sup>

The work undertaken by these deaconesses changed over time, as they responded flexibly to the changing demands of the context.<sup>19</sup> Whilst some of these roles (such as pastoral work and outreach work with marginalised groups) might be recognisable in the work of these Methodist deacons today, other roles (such as nursing and foreign missionary roles) have noticeably declined or changed. To take just one example, Methodist deacons’ involvement in healthcare in Britain has changed considerably due to factors such as the continued development of the nursing profession and expanding state involvement in this sector, particularly since the National Health Service Act of 1946. This has meant that the current involvement of Methodist deacons in British healthcare now tends to be in chaplaincy roles rather than in directly providing nursing care themselves, and these chaplaincy roles are often undertaken alongside presbyteral and lay colleagues.

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**15** Maurice Staton, *The Development of Diaconal Ministry in the Methodist Church: A Historical and Theological Study*, PhD thesis, Leeds (University of Leeds), 2001. I am particularly indebted to Staton for drawing together the relevant original sources from the history of British Methodism throughout this article.

**16** *Ibid.*; E. Dorothy Graham, *Saved to Serve: The Story of the Wesley Deaconess Order 1890–1978*, Peterborough (Methodist Publishing House) 2002; Ronnie Aitchison, *The Ministry of a Deacon*, Peterborough (Epworth), 2003.

**17** Staton (n. 15); Graham (n. 16).

**18** Wesley Deaconess Institute Mission Book 1895–1910, 157–158, cited in Graham (n. 16), 8.

**19** Staton (n. 15); Graham (n. 16).

In addition to numerous incremental changes over the years, a combination of these changing needs and internal changes led the Methodist Church to cease recruiting new deaconesses in 1978.<sup>20</sup> After a period of considerable uncertainty and widespread debate within the Methodist Church in Britain about its continued existence, the female-only Wesley Deaconess Order was reformed by the Methodist Conference of 1986 into what became known from 1988 as the Methodist Diaconal Order.<sup>21</sup> The Methodist Diaconal Order included all of the previous Wesley Deaconesses, and accepted new candidates irrespective of whether they were male or female (with both becoming referred to as ‘deacons’). By 1998, members of the Methodist Diaconal Order had become fully recognised and officially affirmed within British Methodism as an equal but different ordained order of ministry to that of being a presbyter, through being received into ‘full connexion’ in the same way as presbyters.<sup>22</sup> Throughout their history, this vocation was also identified as being part of the wider Church. For example, the wording in their original ‘setting apart’ services stated that they were considered to be called to be deaconesses in the Church of God<sup>23</sup>, and latterly in their ordination services they were recognised as being called to be deacons in the universal Church<sup>24</sup>.

## **Making connections in contested territory: The challenges of a contemporary British Methodist deacon’s role**

The publicity produced by the Methodist Diaconal Order in 2010 describes themselves as “a mission-focused, pioneering religious community committed to enabling outreach, evangelism and service in God’s world”.<sup>25</sup> Their work is described on their website in 2011 as “incredibly varied” depending on where they are placed, offering a “model of Christian service” that is essentially “people centred,

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<sup>20</sup> Methodist Church in Britain, Minutes of Conference, 1978, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Staton, 257–299.

<sup>22</sup> Methodist Church in Britain, What is a Deacon?, 2004, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Methodist Church in Britain, Order of Service for the Setting Apart of Deaconesses, 1905; Methodist Church in Britain, The Ordination of Deaconesses, 1936.

<sup>24</sup> Methodist Church in Britain, The Ordination of Deacons and Deaconesses, 1989; Methodist Church in Britain, Ordination of Deacons, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Methodist Diaconal Order, The Methodist Diaconal Order, Peterborough (Methodist Publishing) 2010.



encouraging, enabling, supporting and pastoral in nature”.<sup>26</sup> Examples of deacons’ current activities given on this website include involvement in training, children’s and youth work, chaplaincy, teaching (e.g. Bible study and church membership exploration), bereavement support in prison, sharing God with others, visiting and pastoral care and engaging in community development work.<sup>27</sup> This work has included developing projects that provide support to those within communities who have particular needs and/or those who are often excluded (e.g. through developing community centres, group holidays for isolated elderly people, families work, working with homeless people, providing support to those who have been victims of trafficking, etc.).

These contemporary activities, and their historical forerunners, are significant because they locate the deacons’ ministry in a contested and frequently ambiguous position. This position is their location between the life of the Church and the wider everyday lives of people, whether they belong to the Church or not. Making connections between these spheres is a fundamental missional challenge for all churches seeking to find ways of reinvigorating and making relevant their life of Christian faith within contemporary contexts.<sup>28</sup> This is especially true in contexts experiencing concerns over church decline and significant debates about the place of faith in public life.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the deacons’ position places them in highly contested territory from the outset, as they engage in these essential but controversial fields. Indeed, by overlapping these different spheres in order to connect them, a deacon’s position has frequently made their role and identity the symbolic focus for the underlying conflicts about issues which are much wider than their own role. For example, these wider issues include those such as how the church and the Christian faith should engage with contemporary society and culture, and what form mission and church should take in this context.<sup>30</sup> Reflecting on what can be learnt from deacons’ experience in this territory offers a potentially significant contribution to these crucial debates, which are central to both public concerns about the place of faith-based action in public life and to the Church’s continued existence within this social sphere.

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**26** Methodist Diaconal Order, *Different Styles of Diaconal Ministry*, retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> May 2011 from: <http://www.methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk/default.asp?page=10>.

**27** Ibid.

**28** cf. David Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*. Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity, Peterborough (Epworth) 2005.

**29** Robert Furbey, *Controversies of ‘Public Faith’*, in: Adam Dinham, Robert Furbey and Vivien Lowndes, *Faith in the Public Realm. Controversies, Policies and Practices*, Bristol (Policy Press) 2009, 21–40.

**30** See, for example, the discussion in: Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture*. Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2005.

Whilst the particular social policies, sociologies and theologies surrounding these wider issues are much debated, the deacon's position in British Methodism provides an example of how deacons often take on roles that enable these connections to be made in various ways. Indeed, the British Methodist experience is particularly helpful in this regard, as it can be seen as lying on a spectrum between:

1. those denominations in which the diaconate has historically taken on a primarily liturgical role, with little focus or engagement with wider communities (such as in some but not all Orthodox traditions)<sup>31</sup>; *and*
2. at the other extreme, those denominations in which the diaconate has historically taken on a primarily charitable focus, with little continuing involvement with the daily lives of church congregations (such as in some continental European Protestant churches).

The stationing of deacons within local Circuits of British Methodist churches, with briefs for roles which often include forms of wider engagement with surrounding communities, provides a good example of how such diverse denominational experiences of deacons' roles can begin to be connected. At the same time, ecumenical dialogue observed during the research highlighted ways in which Methodist deacons might also learn from other denominations; for example, in terms of more ways that they could be involved liturgically.

## The ecumenical importance of the diaconate in developing understandings of relationships between ministries

Reflecting on the diversity of different experiences of the diaconate also has much to offer in other regards, such as in thinking critically about the nature of all ministry and relationships between ministries in an ecumenical context.<sup>32</sup> As the brief outline of the historical development of the diaconate within British Method-

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**31** Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, A Commentary on the Diaconate in the Contemporary Orthodox Church, in: Christine Hall (ed.), *The Deacon's Ministry*, Leominster (Gracewing) 1992, 147–158. However, also note significant differences between Orthodox theologians on the roles of the diaconate as it pertains to women's roles in ministries; see: Pauline Kollontai, *Contemporary Thinking on the Role and Ministry of Women in the Orthodox Church*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, 2, 2000, 165–179.

**32** Avis (n. 4).

ism has shown, understandings of a deacon's ministry have evolved over time within particular denominations, and often involved varied contributions at any one time by different deacons in different places. In addition to this intra-denominational diversity, there remain considerable differences in forms, theologies, structures, traditions, polity and practices of ministry between different denominations and contexts, for which the deacon's role has become a significant focus.<sup>33</sup>

The sheer extent of this diversity prohibits a comprehensive consideration of all the potential differences between denominations here. However, key areas of cross-denominational differences within these debates include over what type of ministry deacons are understood to be fulfilling in different denominations, and the extent to which they are understood to fulfil an ordained role within these denominations. Even if just differences in the British context are considered, there are a wide range of forms and understandings of the status of diaconal ministries. Jackson, a former Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order, emphasises that deacons within this Order are not now seen as a lay office, as they are, for example, in some Baptist traditions.<sup>34</sup> Nor are Methodist deacons in Britain an assistant parochial minister or primarily involved in exercising a professional ministry in wider fields such as health, welfare or education, such as in some Lutheran churches.<sup>35</sup> Nor is the Methodist diaconate in Britain "a transitional stage en route to ordination as a priest", as it has been historically understood in some other traditions such as Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches.<sup>36</sup> However, as Avis notes, increasingly "Churches of the Anglican Communion also have many 'distinctive' (not necessarily permanent) deacons", and the Roman Catholic Church restored a permanent diaconate following the Second Vatican Council which includes married men who could not be priested.<sup>37</sup> Various denominations have had Deacons or Deaconesses who are recognised in some other way without this necessarily being seen as 'ordination', such as those who see these as being commissioned, not ordained. In addition, there are other recognised ministries which share much with British Methodist deacons in terms of the character of their work, such as the United Reformed Church's Church-Related Community Workers.

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**33** World Council of Churches, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper 111, Geneva (World Council of Churches) 1982.

**34** Sue Jackson, *The Methodist Diaconal Order: A Sign of the Diaconal Church*, in: David Clark (ed.), *The Diaconal Church: Beyond the Mould of Christendom*, Peterborough (Epworth) 2008, 159–170, here 160.

**35** Ibid.

**36** Ibid.

**37** Paul Avis, *Wrestling with the Diaconate* in: *Ecclesiology* 5, 2009, 3–6, here 3.

These are men and women commissioned to a particular church, Local Ecumenical Partnership or group of churches on “terms which are equitable to those for ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament”. This commissioning is for their own specific ministry to develop forms of theologically-reflective community work within these churches’ “own life ... order, outreach, worship, mission and ministry”.<sup>38</sup> More widely, there are other religious orders that include lay and/or ordained members sharing commitments to common rules or goals which may be seen in some way as including those relating to diaconal ministry in a broader sense, such as for example the Iona Community, or Tertiary Franciscan orders.

The diverse understandings of the diaconate and related ministries, when brought together and considered comparatively, show how their existence can raise many questions about how these churches understand the nature of ministry, as well as what it entails and how it should be organised. Indeed, the specific questions over the deacon’s position have made this role a frequent focus for any conflicts over relationships between different forms of ministry within particular denominations, whether between lay and/or ordained ministries, even since the early Church.<sup>39</sup> This has often led to clashes in relationships between deacons and those involved in other forms of ministry, including presbyters and a wide range of lay ministries. For example, in the Church of England, there have been particular debates over the relationship between deacons’ roles and those of others such as Readers<sup>40</sup> and, more recently, Pioneer Ministers.

## The deacon as the catalyst for debates over the relationship between lay and ordained ministries, and enabling lay ministry

Underlying and contributing to such conflicts and debates, there remains “still a great deal of [cross-denominational] confusion as to whether the diaconate should be an ordained order of ministry or be regarded as lay ministry”<sup>41</sup>. Depending on denomination, interpretation and context, the diaconate’s position is frequently

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**38** United Reformed Church, Could God Be Calling You to the Ministry of Church Related Community Work?, [http://www.urc.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/crcw/images/leaflet\\_1](http://www.urc.org.uk/what_we_do/crcw/images/leaflet_1), May 2011 (accessed 3rd January 2012).

**39** Barnett (n.13).

**40** Elaine Bardwell, The Pastoral Role of the Deacon, in: Christine Hall (ed.), *The Deacon’s Ministry*, Leominster (Gracewing) 1992, 45–66.

**41** Staton (n.15), 19.

considered as being in some way positioned at the intersection between lay and ordained, however it ultimately becomes classified. Staton describes the Methodist Church's position, when deciding to reform the diaconate in the form of the Methodist Diaconal Order, as being "Stuck between the Reformed Church position of the diakonia of the laity and the High Church position of a diaconate that was seen as a priest in training".<sup>42</sup> This left it facing a range of issues when deciding who would constitute any reformed diaconate:

To include in the diaconate those who render particular services to the world as probation officers, social workers, teachers or child-care workers would mean that the list would be endless. The question was asked whether the diaconate included only paid workers or those who worked under the discipline of the Church? ... Then there was the question of those lay persons who exercised a ministry in the Church as pastoral visitors, class leaders or local preachers. The conferring of semi-clerical status on such persons was not seen to be helpful.<sup>43</sup>

The Methodist Conference was particularly concerned that the ministry of deacons should not "take the place of the servant ministry of all members of the Body of Christ".<sup>44</sup> As a way of determining these issues within British Methodism, the line between ordained deacons and lay people in the wider church was drawn so that only those who were accepted into a full-time, itinerant paid ministry as part of a disciplined life within a religious order were recognised as deacons. However, other denominations have adopted substantially different models when recognising deacons and organising their work. In particular, not all denominations require deacons to be full-time, paid and/or itinerant in this way; for example, Roman Catholic deacons in the UK usually take on this role in a part time, unpaid capacity alongside other work within their own local community where they live.

This discussion shows how a deacon's ministry provokes wider theological questions about the relationship between:

- (i) Views that see diaconal work (however that is interpreted) as the responsibility of *all* Christians; *and*
- (ii) Views that see this ministry as being focused and represented in (or even primarily belonging to and the responsibility of) a particular specific named role that is commissioned and/or directed by the Church.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Staton (n. 15), 261. (In the original, the word 'diakonia' is in its New Testament Greek form.)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Agenda, Representative Session of Conference, 1988, 826, cited in Staton (n. 15), 298.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see the discussions in: Kari Latvus, *The Paradigm Challenged: A New Analysis of the Origin of Diakonia*, in: *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 62, 2, 2008, 142–157. Also, John N. Collins, *Are All Christians Ministers?*, Collegeville, Minnesota (Liturgical Press),

Whilst it is possible for both to be true, these debates then reflect related underlying tensions between the extent to which it is considered that deacons should focus on *enabling others* to do diaconal work, and/or the extent to which they should *do this work themselves*.

This is illustrated in the way that some other diaconal movements (such as some prominent continental European models) have developed professionalised models of providing welfare services on behalf of the wider church, representing churches/churches' values through specialised service delivery undertaken by the deacons themselves.<sup>46</sup> This specialisation enables those engaged in diaconal ministry to deliver a particular form of professionalised service as a way of offering the highest possible standards in representing the church and God. However, it also sees churches entering a marketplace of service providers, with questions about how this work remains connected with the life of local churches. British Methodism has adopted a more generic and church-linked model, with deacons being linked to local groups of churches ('circuits') to undertake a wide range of diverse roles that frequently change for a particular deacon from one appointment to the next. In this context, the importance of flexibility is more emphasised than any requirement to have specialist professional training in one particular field. Indeed, these deacons see a key part of their role as showing how the whole church can engage in diaconal work, even without possessing specialist expertise at the outset, and thus enabling others to get involved. For example, rather than doing the work themselves using specialist expertise that only they possess, they seek to model how this work can be done even when they don't have pre-existing professional training. This may be done, for example, by learning new skills and undertaking additional training alongside others within particular settings where this is necessary to undertake what work is discerned to be necessary in that particular context at that time. David Clark, a Methodist Deacon, argues that a key role for Deacons in this context is to support the 'liberation of the laity', seeing their role as increasingly involving being 'change agents' and community educators to achieve this.<sup>47</sup>

Such an approach has arguably become increasingly important in a contemporary context where 'enabling the discipleship of the whole people of God' has become a central theme of Connexional strategies to reinvigorate the Methodist

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1992; David Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*. Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity, Peterborough (Epworth), 2005.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Anders Bäckström and Grace Davie with Ninna Edgardh and Pet Pettersson (ed.), *Welfare and Religion in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Europe: Volume 1. Configuring the Connections*, Farnham, Surrey (Ashgate) 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Clark (n. 28), 273–295.

church.<sup>48</sup> Similar shifts have been happening in global understandings of mission, with theologians such as Bosch pointing to the importance of widening global Church understandings of who is involved in delivering the God's mission beyond a clergy-centred perspective.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, on a practical level, the membership and funds available to many Methodist churches are falling and there are limited numbers of ordained ministers available or affordable, a situation shared by many other denominations. In situations like this, enabling diverse forms of lay ministry is especially crucial for churches as they seek to survive and develop whilst supporting their members to grow in their Christian faith and apply this faith to their everyday lives.

However, there remain tensions here for the Methodist Diaconal Order, not least over the implications of this way of working for deciding how deacons should be trained. For example, given the diversity of potential stations a deacon may be placed in and the diverse expectations that may be placed upon them to develop diverse lay ministries, what training and learning opportunities are needed for the deacon, and how might these best be provided? Also, how might this training link appropriately with training provided in related professional fields?

All of these challenges can be seen as a microcosm of the broader challenges facing diaconal movements and those managing faith-related social welfare organisations, as they operate in a landscape of huge organisational and social changes affecting this type of social service.<sup>50</sup> The specific challenges and responses may vary given the diverse forms of church contributions to social welfare in different and changing national state policy contexts.<sup>51</sup> However, the underlying issues of how Christians and churches engage, individually and collectively, in social action and mission, who does this, in what role, and how they are enabled and trained to do so, all remain pressing questions central to the Church's future. This makes critically exploring the deacon's role as an important focal point for these debates increasingly crucial.

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**48** Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship and the People Called Methodists*, Peterborough (Methodist Publishing) 2010.

**49** Bosch (n. 2).

**50** Malcolm Torry, *Managing God's Business: Religious and Faith-Based Organisations and their Management*, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2005; Patricia Wittberg, *From Piety to Professionalism – and Back? Transformations of Organized Religious Virtuosity*, Oxford (Lexington) 2006.

**51** See, for example, the discussion of contributions in different national European contexts in Bäckström et al. (n. 46).

## Continuing debates over Biblical foundations and applications

Underpinning all the differences discussed in this article so far have also been a range of different interpretations of the Biblical foundation claimed for understanding the nature of diaconal work. Those exploring these debates have encountered a wide variety of foundational understandings in terms of how Biblical material (particularly the use of the Greek term ‘*diakonia*’ and its related terms) should be applied into different historical, contemporary, denominational and social contexts.<sup>52</sup> In particular, developments in wider Biblical and early church scholarship have led to traditional understandings of the meaning of deacons’ ministry being challenged. One particular meaning that has been controversially challenged has been the traditional emphasis on understanding deacons’ ministry as servanthood. These challenges have included arguments by Biblical scholars such as Collins, Gooder and Hentschel that the meaning of this family of words in the original Greek should be extended to include connotations of being an ambassador or ‘go-between’, with particular questions concerning whether this should necessarily be seen as a low status role.<sup>53</sup>

This questioning of traditional interpretations of the deacon’s role as service/servanthood has taken place in a broader social context where churches have faced numerous critiques and global challenges about their understanding and use of different forms of power and status.<sup>54</sup> This has included critiques of

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**52** For example, see the debates in: Barnett (n.13); Charles Yrigoyen Junior, *The Office of Deacon. A Historical Summary*, in: *Quarterly Review* 19, 4, 1999, 327–342; John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church. Making Connections between Old and New*, Leominster (Gracewing) 2002; Paula Gooder, *Towards a Diaconal Church. Some Reflections on New Testament Material*, in David Clark (ed.), *The Diaconal Church: Beyond the Mould of Christendom*, Peterborough (Epworth) 2008, 99–108;

**53** For example, see: Collins; Paula Gooder, *Diakonia in the New Testament. A Dialogue with John N. Collins*, in: *Ecclesiology* 3, 1, 2006, 33–56; Gooder, 2008; John N. Collins, *Reinterpreting Diakonia in Germany*, in: *Ecclesiology* 5, 2009, 69–81; Kari Latvus, *The Paradigm Challenged. A New Analysis of the Origin of Diakonia*, in: *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 62, 2, 2008, 142–157; Kari Latvus, *Diaconal Ministry in the Light of the Reception and Re-Interpretation of Acts 6: Did John Calvin Create the Social-Caritative Ministry of Diaconia?*, *Diaconia* 1, 2010, 82–102.

**54** For a wider critical discussion of the importance of considering power and relationships within church communities in the contemporary context, see Roy Kearsley, *Church, Community and Power*, Farnham, Surrey (Ashgate), 2008. This can be set in a broader context of international sociological debates about the complex relationships between religion and politics; see, for example: Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, Cambridge (Polity Press) 2003.



churches' previous collusions and misuses of power and status within their own corporate life and within the ways they have engaged with wider society.<sup>55</sup> Within such a sensitive context, getting contemporary theologies and expressions of service right can arguably be a powerful way of communicating the Gospel and reconnecting the Church with those alienated from it. However, to do this requires understanding the complex way that issues of power and status have been woven into the historical fabric of the development and narrative of the deacons' ministry which is seen as key to this service.

## The significant impact of gender within these ministry debates

These issues of power, status and service are particularly apparent when critically exploring the relationship between gender and the ministry of deacons and deaconesses. In this light, the correlation between what was traditionally "women's ministry" in the British Methodist Church and a patriarchal tendency to translate/interpret the Biblical texts in ways which cast this ministry in subservient terms warrants particular critical scrutiny. The debates about what the respective roles of different ministries should be, and whether a deacon is seen as 'fully' ordained with British Methodism, can also be critically recast in this light. Indeed, wider historical and ecumenical debates over developing understandings of the ministry of deacons have been significantly influenced and complicated by the impact of continuing debates over the relationship between ministry and gender, as will now be explored.

In many ways, issues of gender can be seen as central to the re-emergence of the diaconate internationally, although the precise role it plays differs between denominations. In British Methodism (and some other denominations), the sudden growth of deaconess movements from the nineteenth century took place in a social context where this was one of few avenues for women to engage in paid active employment in wider society.<sup>56</sup> As women in wider British society subsequently gained improved equality as part of broader social changes supported by successive waves of feminist movements, their position in the Church changed as

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<sup>55</sup> For example, see Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out. A New Approach to Christian Mission*, London (Continuum) 2004. This can be set in a broader context of developments such as liberation theologies; see, for example, Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1999.

<sup>56</sup> Staton (n. 15), especially 39–55 and 148–163.

well, as some denominations re-evaluated historic views. In some denominations, the diaconate was central to this development; for example, the Church of England, had long had a deaconess movement that was separate (but linked) to its recognition of male deacons.<sup>57</sup> In 1987, this denomination eventually opened a diaconate consisting of both men and women, in what Francis and Robbins describe as ‘the long diaconate’ period of transition towards women finally being accepted for ordination to the priesthood in 1994.<sup>58</sup> Since then, parts of the Church of England have reflected further on developing a theology that includes a ‘distinctive diaconate’ for those who are not called to continue into ordination as a priest.<sup>59</sup> Even in traditions such as those within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, which have remained more conservative about the role of women in ordained ministry, there are still limited opportunities available for women to minister in some ways (e.g. within particular offices or religious orders).<sup>60</sup> In British Methodism, the original conceptualisation of deaconesses as belonging to a religious order provided freedom for women to minister, whilst at the same time reinforcing certain inequalities; as well as having lower status, active deaconesses were originally engaged on worse terms than male presbyteral colleagues (e.g. in terms of housing, stipend, etc.).<sup>61</sup> When deaconesses were part of the Wesley Deaconess Order, a male Warden (a presbyter) was historically appointed by Conference, and he had significant power over many aspects of the women’s ministry. For example, this was reflected in higher expectations on deaconesses than presbyters that they would go wherever the Warden stationed them, without the deaconesses having any choice in the matter (a process termed ‘direct stationing’). Initially, deaconesses were also expected to remain single (even though there was no comparable requirement in the Methodist Church in Britain for their presbyteral colleagues). Those that did marry were excluded from holding an appointment (although this did change to become permissible from 1966).<sup>62</sup> Wo-

57 Janet Grierson, *The Deaconess*, London (CIO Publishing) 1981.

58 Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins, *The Long Diaconate: 1987–1994. Women Deacons and the Delayed Journey to Priesthood*, Leominster (Gracewing) 1999.

59 E.g. Renewed Diaconate Working Party of the House of Bishops (n. 5); Diocese of Salisbury, *The Distinctive Diaconate. A Report to the Board of Ministry*, The Diocese of Salisbury, Salisbury (Sarum College Press) 2003.

60 For example, see Kollontai (n. 31) for a detailed discussion on the historic contestations over women in ministry in different Orthodox traditions, including debates over whether there should be deaconesses and if so, how they should be regarded.

61 See, for example, Staton (n. 15), 210–212. This was also reflected, for example, in the differing official requirements concerning housing for presbyters and deaconesses/deacons in the ‘Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church’ which remained in place over many years.

62 The Methodist Church in Britain, *Minutes of Conference*, 1966, 48, cited in Staton (n. 15), 236.

men were first able to become presbyters in this church in 1974, and at this time a number of deaconesses did become presbyters. This led eventually to a period of decline and questioning of the existence of the Wesley Deaconess Order, before its reformation as a growing renewed Order including both men and women from 1986.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the legacy of this history remains, not least in the memories of all those who remember earlier manifestations of this ministry, as well as the relatively recent battles for recognition, equal treatment and even the very survival of this ministry within this church.

Despite this, the history of organising the diaconate within British Methodism as a religious order arising from this gendered history has also had many positive aspects. The Methodist Diaconal Order has continued to provide high levels of organised mutual support to its members, and enabled them to work collectively to promote and protect their ministry. Their rule of life<sup>64</sup> has provided a shared commitment to guide their ministry and connect them together. In addition, the structure of a religious order has enabled the creation of an organisational space in which creative forms of ministry have flourished, as illustrated by the range of contemporary work described earlier. This structure has become self-led, with the Warden now being elected from within the Order, and able to play a role in representing this ministry in the wider structures of the Methodist Church. In this context, it is significant that all of the Wardens appointed so far since the reformation of the Order have been female.

## Emerging commonalities in a global context

Exploring the particularities of this history of evolution of deacon's ministry within one particular denomination shows how the diaconate can raise vital questions about the nature of ministry within the life of the Church and wider society. Such questions are at the heart of contemporary challenges facing the global Church. In particular, these vital questions include who may 'minister' as part of the Christian community, how they may minister, and what the nature of this ministry is understood to entail, as well as how different ministries (whether lay and/or ordained) relate together. Within the peculiarities of its own particular history, the experience of the Methodist Church in Britain exemplifies the way

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<sup>63</sup> Staton (n. 15), 257–290.

<sup>64</sup> The Methodist Diaconal Order, Rule of Life, <http://www.methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk/default.asp?page=11> (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> July 2011).

that evolving responses to the diaconate can be symbolic of different churches' responses to these crucial global debates.

Perhaps this analysis helps to explain why there is a growing sense of significant commonalities shared between those rediscovering forms of diaconal ministry in different contexts. Such commonalities are increasingly leading those involved to recognise a common identity through their ministry, despite very diverse sets of contexts, denominational forms and parts of the world. This sense of common identity is embodied and epitomised in the 'World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Communities' (Diakonia World Federation). This federation is a membership body consisting of "associations, organizations and communities of deaconesses, deacons, diaconal sisters and brothers, diaconal ministers and other church workers from across the world".<sup>65</sup> The Methodist Diaconal Order is a member of this federation, and a deacon from the Methodist Diaconal Order is currently President of Diakonia Region Africa Europe, one of three regional groupings within the federation.

The Diakonia World Federation Executive Committee articulates a common international vision of "how we experience our diaconal calling in our diversity"<sup>66</sup> that is helpful in reflecting on the debates outlined by the analysis in this article. The diversity of practical expressions of diaconal ministry represented within this federation has meant that "Because of the diversity of cultures, political situations, and church governance, it is difficult to articulate a single vision for diaconal ministry".<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, their ecumenical exchanges have led them to recognise themselves as having "one common identity as servants of Christ, our common goal of being God's presence in the world"<sup>68</sup>, and recognise themselves as sharing common concerns with living a life of radical servant ministry in community. In response to the issues concerning the relationships between ministries, they make an important distinction in distinguishing carefully between diakonia and the diaconate, seeing diakonia as "Christian service to which all the baptized are called and which is part of the mission of Christ's church in the world"<sup>69</sup>. The diaconate is more specifically seen as "Those called, identified, prepared, set apart and/or commissioned [or ordained] for 'public' ministry of diakonia, sometimes

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<sup>65</sup> Diakonia World Federation, Diakonia World Federation – Who We Are, <http://www.diakonia-world.org/en/main/whoweare.shtml>, March 2010 (accessed 9<sup>th</sup> June 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Diakonia World Federation Executive Committee, Diaconal Reflections: How We Experience Our Diaconal Calling in Our Diversity, [http://www.diakonia-world.org/files/theologiepapier98\\_english.pdf](http://www.diakonia-world.org/files/theologiepapier98_english.pdf), 1998 (accessed 8th June 2010), 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 1.

doing diakonia in the name of the church, sometimes encouraging greater involvement of all the baptized in diakonia, and sometimes serving as a sign and reminder that Christ has called the whole church to diakonia.”<sup>70</sup>

This service is described as a choice of costly service empowered by the Holy Spirit rooted in the love of Christ, enabling others “to experience God’s unending, unconditional, love and forgiveness”<sup>71</sup> which is for all, whilst seeking justice, healing and providing prophetic witness. It is seen as “a constant movement of gathering and dispersing” in which “the sending out or diaconal nature of the Church completes its life and purpose”<sup>72</sup>. This movement links the people of God gathered as a community in worship with the Church acting in the world as Christ’s servants.

## **A liminal ministry between churches, wider society and those who are marginalised**

These emerging international ecumenical understandings offer significant contributions which can aid churches’ reflections on diaconal ministry, and the role of the deacon within it. The moving nature of diaconal ministry which they propose encompasses the whole Church, recognising how this ministry often overlaps with the ministries of others at different points within its movement. At the same time, central to understanding this movement is the recognition of deacons as being those who are often located in multiple places, and whose role focuses on making connections between them. For example, Brown describes three key locations for the ministry of a deacon as being in the church, in the wider world and with those “on the margins” of both; as a result, they are necessarily “liminal people who are comfortable living on boundaries”<sup>73</sup>. Indeed, the situation for deacons is often more complex than this, as there are often multiple communities for deacons to engage with and move between, both within and outside any churches to which they may relate.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 1 (emphasis as in the original).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Rosalind Brown, *Being a Deacon Today. Exploring a Distinctive Ministry in the Church and in the World*, Norwich (Canterbury Press) 2005, xiii.

<sup>74</sup> Clive Marsh, *Living Christ Within and Beyond the Diaconal Church*, in David Clark (ed.) *The Diaconal Church. Beyond the Mould of Christendom*, Peterborough (Epworth) 2008, 49–59.

Within this movement, a deacon's role may be seen as fundamentally relational, about making connections between these diverse individuals and groups, playing a role as an intermediary where necessary to reconcile relationships.<sup>75</sup> For example, the Renewed Diaconate Working Party of the House of Bishops in the Church of England described a deacon's role as being:

a go-between, a bridge, an envoy, whose special ministry is to take the message, meaning and values of the liturgy, as a key expression of the gospel, into the heart of the world and, by the same token, to bring the needs and cares of the world into the heart of the Church's worship and fellowship.<sup>76</sup>

In doing so, their ministry has been seen as having incarnational and sacramental significance, in applying, symbolising and embodying the Gospel in contemporary culture and society. In this, the simultaneous strength and perceived weakness of the diaconate is that it embodies like Jesus a set of incarnational Gospel imperatives. These include going in order to serve, freely giving without obligation, showing God's love through actions and care, often making oneself vulnerable in the process of showing solidarity with those who are disadvantaged and marginalised, whilst also enabling disciples to grow through engaging in forms of diaconal ministry for themselves. In doing so, deacons also bring the concerns of the wider world to the Church in ways that provoke and equip members to engage in prayer and action.

However, there can be tensions between the deacon's roles in these different locations. Their roles can appear to be very different between the different places where they work, making it harder to express clearly what their ministry entails and how these aspects of their role are connected together. As this article has already considered, it can lead to clashes with other ministries, including those of presbyteral colleagues, if they are perceived as 'treading on their turf'. In addition, the liminal and constantly-shifting position of the deacon, and the weaving together of churches and communities that diaconal ministry entails, can be controversial when the resulting process upsets some preconceptions of what church and faith are about. In the case of British Methodism, Staton sees focusing on the ways that deacons work at the interface between the Church and the wider community as key to understanding their diverse historical contributions. However, he notes that this focus "was not always recognised as valid by an essentially conservative Church who continued to see deaconesses as servants of the

<sup>75</sup> Edward P. Echlin, *Theological Frontiers of the Deacon's Ministry*, in Christine Hall (ed.), *The Deacon's Ministry*, Leominster (Gracewing) 1992, 159–173.

<sup>76</sup> Renewed Diaconate Working Party of the House of Bishops (n. 5), 22.

Church in the narrow sense” of wanting them to just contribute to internal church services and address meetings of women members.<sup>77</sup> Because of this, where deacons spend much of their time in the wider community, often with disadvantaged/marginalised groups, this can lead to tensions with sponsoring Churches. Other controversies can be generated when deacons seek to show that the Church cares for and will speak prophetically on behalf of those who are poor, oppressed, & marginalised, especially when deacons challenge others to listen more carefully to these groups both within and outside churches. Such controversies place the diverse ways that deacons respond within their ministries within much broader important social, political and theological debates about the place of faith in the public sphere, the role of faith-based social action within wider society and its purposes as part of the life of the Church.<sup>78</sup>

Further tensions can arise when deacons such as those in British Methodism are amongst those developing fresh forms of church that are more relevant to these marginalised groups, but whose forms of expression challenge aspects of traditional practice within their sponsoring churches. At the other extreme, where deacons resort to just doing work in wider communities by themselves, without engaging fully with the sponsoring churches, Brown describes a “danger ... of cutting loose from the centre and finding ourselves adrift on the margins with nothing to offer to those we encounter that is distinctively Christian”.<sup>79</sup> She cites Holdsworth to indicate the importance of deacons facilitating potential connections and dialogue with the Church as the “place where the fundamental questions raised by the possibilities of God’s [seeming] absence can dialogue with the traditions that assert his presence”.<sup>80</sup>

In turn, this emphasises the importance of embedding deacons’ ministry within the mandate, strategy and wider activity of the wider Church. As the Renewed Diaconate Working Party of the House of Bishops in the Church of England states:

Of course, deacons alone cannot ‘bridge the gap’. They cannot carry the burden of the Church’s mission. ... Deacons can only be effective in mission when the worshipping community in which they are based is committed to a missionary vision. Moreover, deacons are not the only ones to have a ‘go-between’ ministry ... A renewed diaconate is not a panacea for all the weaknesses of the Church in mission.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Staton (n. 15), 247.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Orton, *Faith, Dialogue and Difference in Christian Community Work: Learning “Good Practice”?*, PhD thesis, Durham University, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Brown (n. 73), 34.

<sup>80</sup> John Holdsworth, *Dwellers in a Strange Land*, Norwich (Canterbury Press) 2003, 109–110, cited in Brown (n. 73), 35.

<sup>81</sup> Renewed Diaconate Working Part of the House of Bishops (n. 5), 22.

This makes it all the more important for deacons to work closely with other forms of ministry on enabling, encouraging, resourcing, organising and developing these diaconal aspects of the wider Church's mission.

## Conclusion

As this article has illustrated through exploring the case of the Methodist Diaconal Order in British Methodism, a deacon's liminal and constantly-shifting position raises many challenging questions about the way that churches currently think about both mission and ministry. As deacons seek to enact and enable the Church's responses to wider needs, they raise questions about the nature of the Church's mission in society. In embodying the challenges which arise through relational service which reaches those who are oppressed and marginalised, the diaconate reflects the wider international challenges facing churches about their role in wider society, including their engagement with issues of power, status and social concerns. In its missional practice of evangelism, radical service and care, and through the transformational building of relationships, it embodies in its multiple encounters many of the controversial aspects of churches' engagement with wider society around the world. In the process, it draws attention to the frequent dilemmas that practice which makes such important connections can raise. As deacons have raised issues of how the Church and wider society should treat those who are discriminated against and oppressed, they have also found these issues represented in the Church's responses to them. In seeking to connect together different aspects of the Church's ministry, they have raised complex questions concerning their understandings of what ministry means and how different ministries (both lay and ordained, internally and across denominations) relate together. Whilst the resulting debates in these various spheres may be discomforting, it is perhaps within the nature of the diaconate's liminal position that in this space also lies the potential for seeds of renewal.

Within the life of the diaconate, all these crucial issues are reflected, enacted and represented, both in what deacons do and in who they are. Indeed, the discussion in this article has shown how the diaconate embodies many of the central tensions within the contemporary Church. The precise manifestations of these issues will vary within different denominations and contexts, and much may be learnt from studying those which may differ from the experience in this or any other particular case. As a result, it has never been more crucial to reflect critically, constructively and comparatively in an international context on the practical experience and theological understandings of those involved in different forms of diaconal ministry. Such reflections may have much to offer the



Church as she seeks to engage effectively in God's mission in the contemporary context. In doing so, to the extent that diakonia is understood theologically as being incarnational, Christians can never pretend that they have mastered the full truth of it. Instead, by participating within it, and forming Gospel-infused relationships through it, they may understand themselves to be "perpetually caught up in the mystery of God's love".<sup>82</sup>

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**82** Brown (n. 73), 124, citing Gerald O'Collins, *Incarnation*, London (Continuum) 2002, vii.