

THE LITURGICAL MINISTRIES OF THE UNITED METHODIST DEACON: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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There I was, authorized to preach the gospel, to call sinners to repentance, to lead them into the church and the Kingdom of God; and here was one ready and I had no authority to publicly pour a little water on her head as a symbol and a token. And she was ready right then, and if postponed until I got an ordained minister, the nearest one being fifty miles away—which was a long way then—when could it ever be done?

I had to think fast. If it had been under any ordinary circumstances, I might have explained the situation to her, but here were the others present that maybe could never understand what it meant; could not understand why I was authorized to preach, yet could not baptize; and as I planned later to have a revival meeting there and take in a great number more, I just quickly decided to baptize her right then and there and did it; *and never said a word about it.*

Did I do wrong? No! I have never to this day had the slightest compunction about it. If I was ever called of God to preach His gospel, I was called to perform all the functions of a minister, and the laying on my head the hand of a Bishop some years later added nothing to the authority to baptize that I did not already have.¹

As this episode from the late 19th century illustrates, Wesley's insistence, following Richard Hooker and others, that there was a clear demarcation between prophets (teachers and preachers) and priests (who uniquely administered the sacraments) had started to fade in the memories of Wesley's spiritual descendents. Wesley's distinction formed the basis of his argument for the legitimacy of lay preachers in an ecclesiastical context that required episcopal permission for any who would expound the word of God.² But the exigencies of United States geography, successful Methodist evangelism, and the exalted societal (and theological) valuation of freedom of the individual under God precipitated erosion of the firm division set up by Wesley. This dissolution affected not only the distinction between the lay and ordained, but also the differentiation in liturgical roles assigned to deacons and elders. Regarding the former, by the 1850s some Methodists requested that certain categories of unordained but licensed local preachers

¹George T. Ashley, *Reminiscences of a Circuit Rider* (Hollywood, CA: Published by the Author, 1941) 59–60.

²See John Wesley's sermon "Prophets and Priests" (no. 121, Bicentennial edition), known also in earlier collections as "The Ministerial Office." Wesley's sermon may have had another intention besides the justification of lay preaching: to demonstrate to the lay preachers the limitations of their liturgical responsibilities.

be allowed to preside at the “sacramental” service of matrimony; a few decades later appeals were made for authorization to baptize. Concerning the roles of the ordained, in the 1860s discussions were held in the popular press and at the General Conferences about whether the deacon’s sacramental responsibilities might expand to include celebrating Holy Communion. And throughout, some Methodist lay preachers, confident that God’s call to ministry included all pastoral duties whether or not episcopal hands had been laid upon them, took up administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper out of concern for the spiritual well-being of their flocks. The ever-pragmatic Methodists faced a quandary—one that has been faced in each succeeding generation. Could the emerging needs of a changing society—and a changing denomination—be met while adhering to the norms and principles set out by Wesley? This question, as it pertains to leadership in Methodist services of worship and presidency at the sacraments, will be examined by focusing on the office of the deacon.

I

Wesley’s position that the “ordinary” ministry comprised bishops, presbyters, and deacons was grounded in testimony from the apostolic church and in the practice of the Church of England, a body Wesley regarded as “the best constituted national church in the world.”³ From his reading of William Cave’s *Primitive Christianity*, Wesley knew that deacons distributed the eucharist to the infirm and poor, and from this liturgical work sprang their social ministry in which they attended and cared for the needy by, among other things, distributing monies intended for their aid. Deacons assisted the bishop and the presbyter in public worship, and on occasion preached and baptized.⁴ Women, following the example of the biblical Phoebe, were specifically assigned a diaconal role in some parts of the early church, as evident in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a church order that Wesley early in his ministry regarded as apostolic and therefore authoritative. The deaconess in *Apostolic Constitutions* also combined liturgical and social ministries, but her work was limited to the women: she arranged and monitored their seating in worship; she assisted the bishop in baptism by immersing them and then by anointing their naked bodies; she functioned as the intermediary between them and the bishop; and she distributed charity to

³Letter to “Our Brethren in North America,” 10 September 1784, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford, vol. 7 (London: Epworth Press, 1931) 239.

⁴William Cave, *Primitive Christianity: Or, the Religion of the Ancient Christians in the First Ages of the Gospel*, 5th ed. (London: Printed for R. Chiswel, 1698) 155–56 (Part I, Chap. 8); also in John Wesley’s *A Christian Library* 31 (Bristol: Printed by E. Farley, 1753) 196–97; see also, for example, the description of the deacon’s role in Sunday worship in Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, Chapter 67.

them, particularly the widows.⁵ Although Wesley later discounted the apostolic authorship of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (the document is now regarded as dating from the late 4th century), he nevertheless saw it as suitable evidence to support the ministry of women in his day as lay preachers, exhorters, teachers, and helpers for the less fortunate.⁶

Church of England polity, as defined by the Ordinal appended to the 1662 Prayer Book, reiterated the ancient diaconal role and expanded upon it. The Anglican deacon was to assist the presbyter at divine service (especially at Holy Communion), read Scripture and the Homilies⁷ in the service, catechize the youth, baptize infants in the absence of the priest, preach (if permitted by the bishop), and identify and minister to the ailing and impoverished within the bounds of the parish. When it was apparent that the “poor sheep in the wilderness” of North America required an ordained ministry, Wesley drew upon familiar resources in defining the work of the deacon in his ordinal. Wesley’s deacon looked more like an Anglican deacon whose tasks were delineated in relationship to the presbyter than a deacon of the early church whose ministry was construed in connection with the bishop. The Methodist deacon, like his Anglican counterpart, was to assist the elder (presbyter) in worship and at the Lord’s Supper, instruct the youth (there is no reference to a catechism), and provide relief for the “sick, poor and impotent.” Wesley added that the deacon was required “to read and expound the holy Scriptures,” but made no reference to the reading of the Homilies. This provision not only reflected current but unrubricized Anglican practice,⁸ but also the reality that the Methodist deacon would, prior to ordination, already have been an experienced preacher. Other innovations also appeared, made undoubtedly in light of common Methodist praxis and the American situation. The deacon, who could baptize in the absence of the elder, which was undoubtedly most of the time, was not limited to infant baptism alone. Perhaps most importantly, Wesley removed parochial restrictions for his deacon who, like the elder, was to itinerate freely, spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land.

The American Methodists at the Christmas Conference of 1784 adopted Wesley’s provision for a diaconate, along with a “superintendent” (later termed bishop, against Wesley’s wishes) and the elder. The diaconal liturgical duties stipulated within the “Form and Manner of Making Deacons” were

⁵*Les Constitutions Apostoliques*, trans. Marcel Metzger, tome 1–3, Sources Chrétiennes nos. 320, 329, 336 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985–1987) books 2, 3, and 8. For other early Christian documents defining the work of the deaconess, see the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Testamentum Domini*.

⁶See Wesley’s sermon “On Visiting the Sick” (no. 98, Bicentennial edition).

⁷“Homilies” refers to the two Books of Homilies, the first issued in 1547, the second in 1571, which, along with the Prayer Book and the Thirty-Nine Articles, function as sources of Anglican doctrine.

⁸Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth, 1970), 248.

accepted without change, but were further amplified by a statement included in the first *Minutes* of the newly constituted Methodist Episcopal Church:

Q. 31. What is the Office of a *Deacon*?

A. To baptize in the Absence of an Elder, to assist the Elder in the Administration of the Lord's Supper; to marry, bury the Dead, and read the Liturgy to the People as prescribed, except what relates to the Administration of the Lord's Supper.

As if to reinforce the limitations of the deacon's sacramental role should any questions about exceptions arise, a separate note was appended under Question 33 regarding the work of a "Helper":

N.B. No *Helper*, or even *Deacon*, shall on any Pretence at any Time whatsoever administer the Lord's Supper.⁹

In addition to these specific duties for the office, the deacon was also expected to conduct public services of praise, prayer, and preaching on Sunday and on other days of the week, inspire private and family devotions by personal example and instruction, encourage observance of the other instituted means of grace (searching the scriptures, attendance at the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian conference), and visit the sick.

Over the next seven years, the definition of the deacon's role was slightly but significantly altered, though he was still limited to *assisting* at the table and his baptismal leadership was possible only in the absence of the elder. Direct reference to burying the dead and the reading of the liturgy was soon omitted from the approved statement. Administering the last rites was the prerogative of all Methodist preachers, ordained or not, and thus probably was no longer believed to require special mention. Removal of the phrase concerning the reading the liturgy may reflect a limitation of the deacon's role, though he, like a "preacher," would have been able to read the liturgy if, as stated elsewhere in the *Minutes*, he got explicit permission from a bishop or elder to do so. The deacon's role as officiant at "the office of matrimony" was also circumscribed, so that, by 1787, his leadership was allowed only "in the absence of the elder." The lack of scriptural and historic precedent for diaconal presidency at weddings coupled with a desire to reinforce the subordination of the transitional diaconate to the presbyterate may have occasioned this change.

II

Following Wesley's death in 1791, the American Methodists felt at liberty to emend at various points the legislation and the liturgical services in what was now called the *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal*

⁹*Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Thomas Coke, the Rev. Francis Asbury and Others* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785) 12-14.

Church. However, the deacon's responsibilities as explicated in the ordinal were left untouched in the extensive revision of 1792, as was the legislative statement on the duty of a "Travelling Deacon" (Section VII):

Question 2. What is the duty of a *Travelling Deacon*?

Answ. 1. To baptize, and perform the office of matrimony, in the absence of the Elder.

2. To assist the Elder in administering the Lord's Supper.

3. To do all the duties of a Travelling Preacher.

Special duties were assigned to those deacons (also elders and preachers) who had charge of a circuit, among them the convening of watchnights and lovefeasts, what were two liturgical events of great importance for the early Methodists. Even with these rules in place in the *Discipline*, the bishops often restated the liturgical province of the deacon in their ordination parchments, as Peter Cartwright attested in his autobiography: in 1806, Francis Asbury declared Cartwright a "proper person to administer the ordinances of baptism, marriage, and the burial of the dead, in the absence of an elder, and to feed the flock of Christ," thereby reiterating the older restriction (and perhaps the continuing practice and preference¹⁰) regarding burial; no mention is made, of course, of eucharistic responsibilities.¹¹ The definitions of the deacon's work from 1792—assignments Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury found to be in accord with the "accounts given us by the fathers of the church, in the purest ages of christianity"¹²—were those that were in place when the Methodist Protestant Church was formed.

According to the paragraph on diaconal duties in the 1830 *Constitution and Discipline of the Methodist Protestant Church*, the deacon was granted unqualified presidency in matters baptismal and matrimonial, though the limitation to an assisting role at Holy Communion was maintained. The deacon's work also as teacher, preacher, and evangelist was emphasized in the "Form and Manner of Ordaining Deacons." At the laying of hands upon the candidate, the president of the Conference prayed that the one ordained would "give heed upon reading, exhortation and doctrine; be diligent, that thy advancement in grace and knowledge, may be manifest unto all men, and that thou mayest save thyself and those that hear thee." When the Bible was delivered to the ordinand, the president continued:

¹⁰Even in the early twentieth century, lay preachers were advised that it was most becoming, regarding burial of the dead, "to defer to those who are ordained" (S. M. Merrill, *A Digest of Methodist Law; Or, Helps in the Administration of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. R. J. Cooke [Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham; New York: Eaton & Mains, 1908] 151).

¹¹*Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) 75.

¹²Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America with Explanatory Notes*, 10th ed. (Philadelphia: Printed by Henry Tuckniss, 1798) 57.

We acknowledge thy authority to preach this word, and to assist the elder in the administration of the ordinances in the church of God.

We charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead, preach the word, be instant in season, out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.

The plural “ordinances” in the first paragraph of this charge may suggest that deacons, though permitted to administer baptism and pastoral rites, were still understood as junior to the elder in their liturgical functions and were to defer to him when necessary. Surprisingly, the characteristic diaconal work of service to others is absent from this statement, though there is a passing reference in the presidential prayer that follows (to be “wholesome examples, in doctrine, in conversation, in love, in faith, in charity, in purity”). Care for the needy as especially the deacon’s purview is likewise absent elsewhere in the *Constitution and Discipline*. Instead, the collection and distribution of money for the poor is assigned to the circuit or station steward. The lack of specific or unique diaconal contributions may have encouraged the removal of the order in 1874 by the Methodist Protestant Church’s General Conference despite the cry that to do so was “a great innovation” and opposed to “New Testament precedent and teaching.”¹³ Years later, in discussing ministry in the Methodist Protestant Church, denominational leader Thomas H. Lewis would offer the bold explanation that “the New Testament recognizes but one order in the ministry, that of elder, deacons not being ministers of the Word.”¹⁴

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, at its creation in 1844, took up both the summary of diaconal ministry in the ordinal as it had been inherited from Wesley and the statement in the *Discipline* on the duty of deacons currently in use by the Methodist Episcopal Church. For sixteen years the two denominations concurred on the diaconal role, until the Methodist Episcopal Church’s General Conference of 1860, at which the Committee on Revisals successfully adjusted the chapter on “traveling deacons” to give unqualified authority to baptize and marry. Yet, perhaps on account of an oversight, the ordinal was not emended to reflect the new permission; it was, however, corrected at the next quadrennial gathering of the General Conference. Also at the General Conference of 1860, a proposal proffered by delegate Miner Raymond of the New England Conference gave to deacons “having pastoral charge authority to consecrate the elements in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁵ Although Raymond’s proposal was defeated, it began a series of similar petitions at future General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal

¹³*Journal of the Eleventh General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church held in Lynchburg, VA., May, 1874* (Baltimore: William J. C. Dulany, 1874) 17.

¹⁴Thomas Hamilton Lewis, *Handbook of the Methodist Protestant Church* (n.p.: Thomas H. Lewis, 1925) 39.

¹⁵*Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Buffalo, NY, 1860*, ed. William L. Harris (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860) 160.

Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (some in the latter also included baptism): I. D. King of the New Jersey Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, sent a resolution to the 1872 General Conference that there should be no distinction between elders and deacons regarding the administration of the sacraments.¹⁶ Not coincidentally, at the same time as these proposals appeared concerning the deacon, requests were raised repeatedly in both denominations to consider the presidency at weddings and the sacraments by unordained pastors in charge. A memorial from the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South to their General Conference in 1890 asked “that the ordination of a preacher be made a condition precedent to his appointment to any pastoral charge, or else that unordained preachers when put into the pastorate be empowered to do all the work belonging to the office.”¹⁷ The argument put forward for full sacramental leadership by both the deacon and the unordained claimed that the congregations pastored by these men were entitled to the full range of pastoral services expected from a minister and should not be deprived of liturgical services offered by their own duly appointed minister’s hands. Opponents of broadening the liturgical roles countered that it was contrary to the historic practice of the wider church, that Wesley had insisted ordination was necessary to administer the sacraments, and that the deacons and unordained desirous of such privileges were typically guilty of impatience with the lengthy process of preparation before presbyteral ordination.¹⁸ At the end of the 19th century, Methodist Episcopal deacons officially had the authority to preach, conduct worship, solemnize matrimony, administer baptism, and assist the elder with the Supper; their Methodist Episcopal Church, South brothers had similar duties, but with the proviso that they could marry and baptize only in the absence of the elder.

Revisions to the Methodist Episcopal Church’s ordinal in 1916 indicate that there may have been shifts in thinking about the deacon in relation to the elder. The texts for inquiry about impediments, which had distinct formulations respectively for the elder’s and the deacon’s rites, were now largely conflated. No longer was the deacon “admitted to that office,” but like the elder he was “received into this holy ministry.” At other places in the deacon’s rite the text was brought into closer parity with that for the elder. A notable change to the deacon’s rite was in the concluding collect where

¹⁶*Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Brooklyn, NY, 1872*, ed. W. L. Harris and G. W. Woodruff (New York: Nelson & Phillips; Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1872) 204.

¹⁷*Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Held in St. Louis, MO, May, 1890*, ed. W. P. Harrison (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1890) 140.

¹⁸See, for example, the debates regarding presidency of the unordained at matrimony that were recorded in the Methodist Episcopal Church’s *Daily Christian Advocate* 14/25 (May 30, 1900) 387.

“this inferior office” in reference to the diaconate becomes “this office,” though the sentence still continues with “that they may be found worthy to be called into the higher ministries in thy Church.” Perhaps this apparent attempt at certain points to blend the two offices was behind some requests, found as late as 1932 in the Methodist Episcopal Church, to abolish the order of deacon.

After years of debate and with great reservations from many of its members, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, at its General Conference of 1926, allowed certain deacons (and unordained preachers) to preside at the eucharist. The same issue had been defeated at the previous General Conference by a margin of only five votes, following an appeal made to the superior sanctity of the Lord’s Supper in comparison with baptism. In 1926, advocates of the minority report who promoted wider permission for eucharistic presidency (with primarily the unordained in mind), refuted any notion of a superior sacrament,¹⁹ and argued their position from their understanding of church history and from the desire to meet practical needs especially in mission areas. The collapse of the mandatory quarterly conferences—at which the Supper was celebrated—to one or two meetings a year added strength to their assertions. W. P. King from the North Georgia Conference opined:

Presiding Elders have said to me that we have thousands of members who are neglected They receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper so seldom that they get out of the habit of caring for it. After a time the preacher gets out from under this disability, but various charges continue always under it, and that because of a principle that we do not find in the New Testament. I challenge anyone to refute the statement that for the first centuries of the Christian Church, in the time of the primitive apostolic Christianity there was no such distinction and no regulations by which a man had to have a certain ordination as Elder in order to administer these sacraments. I trust that this sacerdotal element which is a departure from vital and primitive Christianity may be removed by this Conference.

F. P. Culver of the Central Texas Conference then asked:

Which is more important, the priest or the prophet? Are you going to confer upon a man all of the powers of a prophet and withhold from him the powers of the priest?²⁰

¹⁹One advocate for the minority report cited the Bishops’ Address of 1914, which questioned viewing the Lord’s Supper as a “superior” sacrament. But if the individual who referred to the Address had been honest, he would have had to concede that the section of the Address to which he referred *condemned* the practice legislated in 1906 allowing the unordained pastor in charge to preside at weddings and baptisms! See *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Held in Oklahoma City, OK, May 6–23, 1914*, ed. Gross Alexander and John L. Kirby (Nashville, Dallas, and Richmond: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914) 58–59.

²⁰General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Daily Christian Advocate* 20/13 (May 19, 1926) 98–99.

The legislation that won the day had a restricted leniency, and because it pertained to both the deacon and the unordained local preacher, shrank even further the distinctions between prophet and priest carefully formulated by John Wesley:

Question. What are the duties of a preacher who has charge of a circuit, station, or mission?

Para. 139. Ans. 1. To preach the gospel; to celebrate the rite of matrimony, provided it does not conflict with civil laws; in the absence of an elder or Bishop, to administer baptism and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper with the understanding that no permanent powers of ordination are conferred until granted by the laying on of hands after he shall have met the disciplinary requirements; and in the absence of the Presiding Elder or Bishop, to control the appointment of all services to be held in the churches of his charge. Unordained preachers in charge shall have authority to celebrate the rite of matrimony only within their own pastoral charges, provided it does not conflict with civil laws.

The new provision was clearly understood to be an exception, not a rule: the deacon's duties, as explained in the final *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (1938), were unchanged from the ones promulgated in 1792. No such permission was ever given to deacons in the Methodist Episcopal Church, even those serving as pastors in charge, though there were numerous petitions to that end. Nevertheless, when The Methodist Church was formed in 1939, it kept a deacon who was to preach, conduct worship, marry, baptize, and to assist the elder at the Lord's Supper—unless he was in charge of a station or circuit. Then he was permitted (along with the unordained preacher in charge) temporarily to administer the sacrament “in the bounds of his own Charge, in the absence of the District Superintendent” (para. 223.3).

III

The characteristics of The Methodist Church's deacon outlined in the 1939 ordinal reflected continuity with historic articulations of the deacon's duties as well as changes that had been made in light of new circumstances:

It appertaineth to the Office of a Deacon to assist the Elder in divine service, and especially when he ministereth the Holy Communion, to help him in the distribution thereof; to read and expound the Holy Scriptures; to instruct the youth; and to baptize. And, furthermore, it is his office to search for the needy, that they may be visited and relieved.

This was the revised text that had been approved by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1932. Surprisingly, neither the editors of the Methodist Episcopal Church nor those of the new Methodist Church adjusted the formulation to conform to the reality that most deacons did not assist the elder in worship, and hadn't for some time. But it did concede, at least ritually, that the deacon was subordinate to the elder. Not until 1944 was the first sentence

reworked to state, "It appertaineth to the office of a deacon to conduct divine worship and to assist the elder when he ministereth . . .," and in 1964 it was slightly modified to "It appertains to the office of a deacon to conduct divine worship and to assist the elder in the administration of the Holy Communion, to read"

The stability of the basic definition of the deacon during this period, both in the legislative section of the *Discipline* and in the ordinal, does not tell the whole story. When The Methodist Church took up, somewhat reluctantly, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South's arrangement for eucharistic presidency by all persons serving as pastor in charge, the matter had not been settled, and five years after merger the subject was again broached at the General Conference of 1944. Additional restrictions then appeared in the *Discipline* (para. 308): sacramental administration depended upon obtaining the bishop's written consent; and permission would be rescinded if the sacrament was celebrated outside of the assigned congregation. At the General Conference four years later, the bishops registered their opinion that the current arrangement "involves us in an unsound and illogical position with respect to the meaning of the sacraments and the purpose of ordination."²¹ After heated discussion, the 1948 session concluded with the revocation of the special provision that sanctioned any pastor in charge to celebrate the Supper. A flurry of articles revisiting the subject then appeared in popular Methodist periodicals, with many of them focusing upon the "rights" of the unordained pastor in charge.

A few authors approached the question as it pertained to the deacon's responsibilities and to the existence of the diaconate as a separate order. Paul Sanders, a New York pastor who, a few years later, would be one of the first Methodists to write an academic dissertation on a strictly liturgical topic, proposed in *The Pastor* that the diaconate be reexamined in terms of its unique functions.

We ordain a man deacon, receive him "on trial" in an annual conference, and appoint him in full charge of a local church. What difference is there between him *then*, and the same man two years afterward, received into "full connection" in a conference and continued in charge of the same local church? None at all. Being a deacon among us is practically synonymous with being "on trial" in an annual conference.

During the war recently finished, men were ordained deacon and then elder in immediate succession, so that they might be "fully ordained" in order to go into the chaplaincy. The 1948 *Discipline* allows that in our work overseas a man may be ordained deacon and immediately ordained elder, if this seems expedient. Is not this a tacit admission (1) that deacons are not really different from elders and, practically speaking, may be dispensed with; and (2) that a sacerdotal hangover requires that we go through the form of making such a man a deacon?

²¹*Journal of the 1948 General Conference of the Methodist Church, Held at Boston, MA, April 28-May 8, 1948*, ed. Lud H. Estes (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1948) 174; cf. 670-71.

In terms of function, Methodism actually has a twofold ministry: elders and bishops. Deacons, functionally speaking, are as dead as the dodo in Methodism. Let us be honest and admit that retaining the office is simply a carryover from an earlier historical situation, and that in trying to justify its retention, we introduce a contradiction at the very heart of our theory of orders. Why do we not do away with the office of deacon altogether? Why do we not simply ordain a man elder when he first comes into the conference and takes a charge?

Let us begin afresh by defining the diaconate in terms of its functions. A deacon will then be a minister in The Methodist Church who because of educational, social, or cultural (let us be completely honest!) limitations is not deemed able to serve every church within the connection, but who can in the judgment of the conference and bishop serve acceptably many of our charges. . . .

As a deacon, in charge of a local congregation, he will be ordained to fulfil any function as a minister *in that local parish*. He will be licensed to preach, to celebrate the sacraments, and to perform all the other rites and ceremonies of the church. As far as the civil law is concerned, he will be considered a full-fledged minister. In those states which explicitly require an "ordained minister" for a marriage, he will be able within his own parish to officiate.

It will be objected that this does away with any distinction between deacons and elders. On the contrary, it establishes the diaconate on the only basis on which it can rest as separate from the presbyterate: that is, upon what the church through the Spirit has called a man to do, and upon what by the aid of the Spirit and his innate abilities he is able to do.²²

Sanders' solution did not receive a wide hearing in the denomination. But what he proposed eventually became a reality in The United Methodist Church among associate members of Conference who could constitute what might accurately be called a permanent diaconate.

When the denomination's general body reconvened in 1952, it received a report recommending continuation of the 1948 policy from the Commission organized at the previous Conference to study the ministry. Two additional reports, both from the 1952 Conference's General Standing Committee on Ministry, were presented, with the majority report advocating the restoration of communion administration, and the minority report preferring the 1948 position. The majority report prevailed, and permission was printed with an extended list of provisos, but without the requirement of episcopal signature (para. 308). Thus regarding the duties of the deacon, the 1952 *Discipline* stated (para. 309):

A deacon has authority to preach, to conduct divine worship, to perform the marriage ceremony, to administer Baptism, and to assist an elder in administering the Lord's Supper; *provided* that, while serving as a regularly appointed pastor of a charge, he may be authorized to administer the Lord's Supper under the conditions set forth in para. 308.

To this, in 1960 was added an additional line:

²²Paul S. Sanders, "Our Confusion About Ministerial Orders," *The Pastor* (September 1949) 3-4; cf. the proposal offered by W. A. Cooper at the 1926 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South as reported in the *Daily Christian Advocate* 20/13 (May 19, 1926) 99.

and *provided*, further, that a local preacher who is ordained deacon shall be authorized to exercise ministerial functions only in the charge to which he is appointed or in which he resides.

Attempts were made in 1964, following another study on the ministry, to rescind the current statement, but the denomination retained the rule until 1968.

IV

One of the two predecessor bodies of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, ordained deacons between 1817 and 1825, but after that year discontinued the order.²³ The former Evangelical Church did have deacons in its orders of ministry who were to do the generally assigned work of preachers, perform marriages if necessary, and (as defined by the ordinal, in by now familiar words) assist the elder in worship and at communion, baptize in the absence of the elder, read and expound the scriptures, instruct the youth, and minister to the sick, poor, and helpless. When the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged with The Methodist Church in 1968, they did not bring to the new denomination an order of deacon. Deacons were included among the ordained ministers in The United Methodist Church, but their duties were circumscribed from previous Methodist praxis (para. 311),²⁴ in part reflecting the practices of the former Evangelical Church:

A deacon has authority to conduct divine worship, to preach the Word, to perform the marriage ceremony where the laws of the state or province permit, and to bury the dead. When invited to do so by an elder, he may assist in the administration of the Sacraments. When serving as a regularly appointed pastor of a charge, he shall be granted authority to administer the Sacraments on the charge to which he is appointed.

By this legislation, administration of baptism was not a defining characteristic of a deacon, though effectively the deacon could baptize when pastoring a congregation. This statement, however, stood in direct contradiction to the definition of the deacon's duties presented in the old Methodist ordinal which was still authoritative for the new denomination; there the deacon was permitted to baptize as part of the office. The confusion on this matter was resolved with the approval of an alternative ordinal in 1980²⁵ which on the issue of diaconal sacramental leadership conformed with the legislation in the *Discipline*.

The 1980 ordinal, which borrowed extensively from the 1979 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church, included in its examination of the deacon

²³See A. W. Drury, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: Otterbein Press, 1924) 323.

²⁴According to the 1968 *Discipline*, lay pastors serving as pastors in charge were explicitly not granted the authority to administer either sacrament (para. 349). But that policy was reversed in 1976 (paras. 408; 453.2).

²⁵*An Ordinal: The United Methodist Church*, ed. Section on Worship, General Board of Discipleship (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1979). Although published in 1979, the ordinal was adopted for alternative use by the General Conference in 1980.

numerous references to the servant ministry of the order—previously secondary to a more liturgical definition of diaconal ministry—and to its representative nature.²⁶ The new wording made the deacon more of a participant in the entire work of ministry than a subordinate in transition to “fully ordained” ministry. In keeping with the underlying emphases and principles of the liturgical and ecumenical movements, the rite was designed to restore what was perceived to be the praxis of the apostolic church. At the beginning of the examination, the bishop stated:

My sisters and brothers,
 every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ
 in a ministry of service to the world
 for the glory of God
 and the redemption of the human family,
 In the power of the Holy Spirit.
 God has called you to a special ministry
 that will exemplify this servanthood
 in the Church and in the world.
 In the name of Jesus Christ,
 you are to serve all people,
 particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.
 You are to represent to the Church
 the ministry of servanthood in the world
 to which all Christians are called in baptism.
 You are to interpret to the Church
 the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.
 At all times, by your life and teaching
 you are to show Christ's people
 that in serving the helpless
 they are serving Christ.

Later in the same examination, the bishop gave a definition and description of diaconal duties, equally divided between liturgical and social responsibilities:

The ministry of a deacon is
 to participate with the elders
 in leading the worship of the people
 and in preaching the Word of God;
 to assist the elders at Baptism and the Lord's Supper;
 to serve the needs
 of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed;
 to fulfill such other responsibilities in Church and society
 as are appropriate to a ministry of service;
 and to represent to the Church
 the role of servanthood in the world

²⁶The ecumenical consensus document “In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting,” published in 1976 by the Consultation on Church Union, names the diaconate as one of the several particular ministries of the church that shares in “the ministry of Christ by representing in and for the Church its dependence on and its identity in, the Word of God” (p. 36).

that properly belongs to all God's people.
These are the duties of a deacon.

This balance between social and liturgical duties was kept in the examination in "The Order for the Ordination of Deacons" that was approved for the 1992 *United Methodist Book of Worship*; indeed, the new examination blends together the 1980 sections and creates a more compact statement that shows obvious links with the older document:

My brothers and sisters,
you are to be ordained to the ministry of deacons
in the Church of God.
God has called you to represent to the Church
the ministry of servanthood in the world,
a ministry to which all Christians are called in baptism.
You are to preach the Word of God,
to assist in the leadership of worship,
and to assist the elders at Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.
You are to be a coworker with other deacons,
and with the bishops, diaconal ministers,²⁷ and elders.
In the name of Jesus Christ
you are to serve all people,
particularly the poor, the sick, and the oppressed.
You are to interpret to the Church
the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.
At all times, by your life and teaching you are to show Christ's people
that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ.

Several new concepts are, wittingly or unwittingly, expressed in the ordinal authorized in 1992. The individual is ordained to a "ministry of deacons," which suggests permanence and not temporary duties (of course, transitional deacons, when ordained elder, have been understood to retain the characteristic duties and responsibilities of the deacon). The notion of being a "coworker" with bishops, diaconal ministers, and elders likewise hints at a distinct and ongoing role. Hence, the language of the original itself may have prompted the rethinking of the orders that led, in 1996, to a redefined, permanent diaconate.

V

According to the new orders of ministry, deacons are ordained to "a lifetime ministry of Word and Service" (para. 320), and elders to "a lifetime ministry of Service, Word, Sacrament and Order" (para. 323). As ministers of Word and Service, deacons show continuity with "the continuing work of the deaconess, home missionary, and the diaconal minister" (para. 319)

²⁷The United Methodist Church established the office of diaconal minister in 1976. Persons consecrated to the office were set apart for "specialized ministries of service in the Church's life and mission" (para. 301).

who taught, evangelized, cared for the sick and dying, aided the orphan and the impoverished, preached, led worship, provided sacred music, and served as pastoral assistants. However, these were explicitly defined as *lay* ministers and not *ordained*; in Wesley's terms, they might be "preachers," "teachers," "evangelists," or "helpers," but they were not "priests." The new deacon, by the definition of duties given in the *Discipline* (para. 319), also exhibits at least one characteristic of the former transitional deacon which fits into the category of "priest" since the office, in anticipation of final presbyteral ordination, carries responsibilities of oversight for the liturgical rite of matrimony:

Deacons give leadership in the Church's life: in the teaching and proclamation of the Word; in worship, and in assisting the elders in the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; in forming and nurturing disciples; in conducting marriages and burying the dead; in the congregation's mission to the world; and in leading the congregation in interpreting the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.

Thus the new order of deacon has partially conflated into one of the two categories that Wesley insisted be held apart: prophet and priest. In light of calls for the new deacon also to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper—requests that run counter to the rationale that created the order to be one of Word and Service—what indeed should be the deacon's liturgical duties?

For the better part of the history of United Methodism and its predecessor denominations, presidency at both sacraments has been restricted to the elder. Beginning with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, sacramental leadership was granted to deacons and unordained lay preachers in cases of necessity, but always recognizing the extraordinary nature of the provision; this was the case also in the Evangelical United Brethren Church from its first *Discipline* (1947) onward. During the course of the twentieth century, the provision became more generous to allow any pastor in a regular appointment the privilege of leadership, in effect dissolving the connection between ordination and the sacraments: what was once an exception became the rule. The current policy of permitting commissioned but yet unordained candidates for the order of elder (as well as unordained local pastors) to preside at the sacraments and officiate at weddings exacerbates and perpetuates that dissolution.

If the denomination wishes to define the deacon as a minister of "Word and Service" and the elder as a minister of "Service, Word, Sacrament and Order"—thereby making a distinction between prophet and priest in a Wesleyan sense—the answer about the diaconal liturgical role is clear: the deacon should not administer sacraments or officiate at weddings, for those duties, by definition, belong to the priestly office alone. The official marriage rite's theological emphasis upon Christian marriage as a living out of the baptismal covenant and the wedding as the public confirmation of a derivative covenant also support the case for presbyteral presidency. The deacon can, according to traditional Methodist praxis, lead funeral and

memorial services, and, of course, conduct services of the word, preach, and assist the elder who is presiding at sacramental services. He or she could obviously play a significant part in educating persons for the sacraments and sacramental rites of the church. If the diaconate is to be supported as a distinct and permanent order, it should be, as Paul Sanders pointed out, characterized by a particular function. According to the 1996 statement, that special task is "to embody, articulate, and lead the whole people of God in its servant ministry" (para. 319).

Limiting the deacon's liturgical role may, for persons with strong democratic leanings, appear to enforce a rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy. But to permit diaconal leadership at the sacraments creates another set of problems, these in relationship to the time-honored custom of itinerancy. According to 1996 polity, bishops appoint both orders to the place of ministry, with elders itinerating and deacons at liberty to find their own employment. If, in terms of sacramental function, there is no distinction between deacons and elders, then effectively two categories of "elder" will exist: those who itinerate and those who do not. Given in some Conferences the lack of sensitivity for spousal employment in the appointment process, numerous candidates undoubtedly will opt for the order which will allow them the privileges of sacramental leadership, but greater flexibility in location and types of ministry.

But what about the practical expediency of providing each congregation with a pastor who may preside at the sacraments, whether that person be a deacon or an unordained commissioned or local pastor? This question should be revisited because of the ecclesiological and theological incongruities of permitting the responsibilities of an office to be performed by persons not of that order. As has been seen, there was not unanimity about the practice in the past, and United Methodists are certainly not of one mind on this issue today. Tensions are present in other parts of the Christian church on this same subject as many denominations face the prospect of fewer vocations to the ministry and an increasing number of retirements. Two possible solutions to the question in United Methodism seem evident.

First, sacramental presidency could be limited only to the elder, with no exceptions allowed. This certainly has historic precedent, and given the number of ordained elders in multiple-staff appointments or appointed beyond the local church, would not be overly difficult to implement—unless, in a great sacramental revival, the majority of United Methodist congregations now pastored by persons not elders desired a weekly eucharist. A restriction of sacramental presidency is consistent with the majority of positions taken in ecumenical conversations regarding the ministry in which the authority to preside at baptism and table is granted solely to presbyters and bishops. For example, in defining the diaconate, the ecumenical convergence document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* does not mention the sacraments:

Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servants in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of the congregation: for example by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfil certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities of governance.²⁸

Except for its silence about officiating at weddings, the *BEM* statement looks similar in content to the definition given for the new United Methodist deacon.²⁹

Second (and this may be far more controversial), the denomination could ordain as elder anyone who is assigned to pastor a local congregation, whether or not the individual has completed the stipulated educational requirements. Conference membership could then be linked with educational achievement. Many times in the past, this proposal has been offered—and rejected. But it does have the advantage of firmly connecting ordination with sacramental presidency, and word with sacrament. It is honest about the ministry that every local pastor should be engaged in and equipped to do. And, on the level of ecumenical discussions, such a policy would considerably reduce the critique against current United Methodist polity often levied by other Christian communions.

Through all the myriad revisions legislative and liturgical, through splits and mergers, the role of the deacon as leader of worship, preacher of the word, and assistant at the sacraments has remained remarkably consistent. So has, to a greater or lesser extent, the deacon's work as teacher and servant of the helpless—social ministries born from the deacon's liturgical *diakonia*. These responsibilities, practiced in times ancient, early Methodist, and modern, define the deacon's function and his or her special tasks among the people of God.

²⁸*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) M31.

²⁹In the United Methodist bishops' response to *BEM*, they commented (quite significantly, in light of the changes in 1996), "*BEM* calls into question the United Methodist practice of making deacon's orders the preliminary step to elder's orders. It forces us to articulate a theological meaning of the 'diaconal ministry' apart from itinerancy and membership in the annual conference" (*Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 2, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Paper No. 132 [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986] 196).