



Presentation to  
General Church Meeting at Staines Methodist Church  
on April 2025  
By Pauline Shilston.

## WHAT ARE DEACONS?

In September this circuit will be entering a time of change with the welcoming of a new Superintendent and a deacon. There may be a feeling of uncertainty in different measure in individuals within the circuit as we enter this time of change, but we know that God has been ever present in the many meetings and discussions at Circuit, District and Connexional level, which have been necessary to reach the point we are at now.

Our Chair of the District explained early in the stationing process for 2025, that we would be unable to have two new presbyters as the number of presbyters going into stationing, including recently ordained presbyters, is less than the number of circuits going into stationing. In the light of this the Warden and Deputy Warden of the Diaconal Order visited this circuit to discuss the suitability for the appointment and work of a deacon and the development of a team ministry.

As they say, the rest is history. The big change for us will be having a deacon on the staff and I thought you might like to know about the specific roles of a deacon and how they came about.

Therefore, it is the history and role of the Diaconal Order within Methodism that is the focus of this talk. I hope you find it interesting!

There are in fact two Orders within Methodism – the Presbyteral order and the Diaconal order although the presbyteral order is seldom given that title as such. In a nutshell the Diaconal Order is a religious order but also an order of ministry. However, we will return to this a bit later after we have explored the history of the DO.

The History of the Diaconal Order.

The Order developed from social changes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the Sisters as they were originally called were appointed for:

“any Christian work, except that of the pulpit, the woman is at least the rival of the man. A woman, whose hand is softer than a man’s for works of character, and whose heart is warmer in sympathy with

sorrow, is in many circles more powerful for good than he.”  
(Stephenson, 1890).

How attitudes have changed in 130 years!

Rev Stephenson who was the founder of the Order, insisted after a couple of years, that the Sisters should be paid. This was to allow all women to be able to work and not just those who could afford to work and not to be paid. In broader terms than Stephenson's definition which I quoted a minute ago, the focus of their work should be ministering to the poor, the sick, working in orphanages and in industrial schools. Industrial schools were schools where children who begged, children who were homeless and those who were below 14 and beyond parental control were sent.

The Sisters also became involved with individual churches and circuits. The United Methodist Church were also doing similar work at the time and that came under the umbrella of Home Missions within the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

To put this into a historical context and to explain why there were two similar organisations being developed contemporaneously, these major developments reflected the social policies of some of the Methodist denominations which were in existence fifty or more years before the Deed of Union was adopted in 1932. The Deed of Union was when the Wesleyan Methodists, the Primitive Methodists and the United Methodist joined to create a united church called The Methodist Church now known as the Methodist Church of Great Britain. `

As the 20th century arrived the title 'deacon' was adopted to replace the title 'Sisters'. The word deacon comes from the Greek diakonos meaning "servant." At this time there was development and growth amongst the work of deaconesses and particularly from the Wesleyan Methodist church, they were soon sent to work overseas which in turn resulted in the founding of the deaconess' order overseas.

In this country it became apparent that there was need for a more formal structure of the deaconesses work and a training college was founded by Rev. Stephenson in Ilkley, Yorkshire and opened in 1902

with 17 students. The Methodist Conference had already approved the Wesley Deaconess Order and fully recognised it and the need for a Warden. The Warden's task was to lead the Order. The first Warden was appointed in 1900 and thus the formal start of the Diaconal Order.

To be a deaconess was not to be undertaken lightly – one record shows that a deaconess's day began with serving breakfast for one hundred children and ended some twelve hours later with a concert at 8pm! However, despite these demands on time and energy, by 1932 there were 304 Wesleyan Deaconesses, 45 United Methodist deaconesses and in 1933 24 Primitive Methodist deaconesses joined to become the Wesley Deaconess Order of the Methodist church.

However, all was not rosy. The Deed of Union had caused major changes within the organisation of churches and circuits, and at a secular level the inter war years developed into the time known as the Depression. The circuit reorganisation caused a reduction in financial support for the Deaconess' Order and consequently fewer deaconesses could be trained or be employed. The onset of the Second World War also provided some diversification in the work of deaconesses for they became involved with caring for evacuees and taking services in hospitals many of which had wounded soldiers as patients.

Post WW2, as in much of everyday life, there were major changes in the Diaconal Order. Previously deaconesses had had to leave the Order when they got married but one of the changes was that Ordination into the Diaconal Order was for life. The Ilkley Institute closed and the training in the Diaconal Order now takes place in the ecumenical training college named Queen's College, which is in Birmingham.

Things are never static in this life, are they? The Diaconal Order is no different for in 1973 the decision at Conference to allow women to enter presbyteral ministry was agreed. As a result, it was decided that a Methodist Order of Deacons should be established, and it should be open to men and women. Hence the change in title – all those in the

Diaconal Order are addressed as Deacon whether they are men or women.

The future of the Wesleyan Deaconess Order was also being discussed as it was becoming clearer that there were basically two types of diaconal work – church and social. In 1989 it was decided that the Wesley Deaconess Order should become part of the Diaconal Order and full membership was by ordination which first took place at the Methodist Conference in Cardiff in 1990. This was a recognition of the integration of the Wesleyan Deaconess Order into the Methodist Connexion a hundred years since the work of deacons was founded. The Wesleyan Deaconess Order had previously had their own annual convocation where deaconesses were ordained.

In 1993 Conference agreed that the Diaconal Order should be a religious order, and an order of ministry and the Order's Rule of Life was also approved. In 1998 all deacons were received into full Connexional membership.

So we have come to the end of the potted history, but ministry continues to change and evolve and the Diaconal Order, as part of this is no different but the work of deacons continues to be “Christ-focused, people-centred and lived out in a lifestyle both active and contemplative. We increasingly perceive our role to be pioneering and prophetic, responding to needs, proactive in opportunity through commitment to mission and pastoral care within and beyond the Church.

Opening doors of opportunity, encouraging others to take risks, the contemporary diaconate acting in its capacity as ‘agent of change’, engages imaginatively and collaboratively. (Source: UK Ecumenical Diaconal Consultation, 1997)

### **1) What is a deacon in the 21st Century?**

Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (abbreviated to TMCP) produced a guide to helping in the appointment of a deacon and stated “A deacon is called to assist God's people in worship and prayer, hold before themselves the needs and concerns of the world, minister Christ's love and compassion, visit and support the sick and

the suffering, seek out the lost and lonely and help those they serve to offer their lives to God.” (A deacon in the Circuit, a guide to creating diaconal appointments, TMCP 2021).

## **2) What is the Diaconal Order Rule of Life?**

It is based on much of Jesus’ teachings and is summed up in the statement: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding (Proverbs ch3 v5). As a religious order we recognise the unconditional love of God as known in Jesus Christ. Out of these springs our calling to the sacrificial servant ministry of Christ and to be a dispersed community living by a rule of life. We love because he first loved us. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit to live a life of Prayer, Witness and Service. We seek to do these things through God’s grace and by following the pattern of Jesus Christ who lived among us. In humility he washed the feet of his disciples and calls us to follow his example. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/the-diaconal-order/living-by-a-rule/> , referenced March 2025).

## **3) What is the Order?**

The Order provides the means for: fellowship and encouragement, pastoral care and mutual support, prayer and discipline, a gracious space to grow and opportunities to explore, celebrate and share in God’s purpose and plan. As members of the Order, we have a communal sense of identity and belonging, a collective responsibility, a mutual accountability, a shared life of prayer, a common calling, and a lifelong commitment.

If you would like to hear more about the Diaconal Order, on the Methodist Church in Britain website there is a section explaining more about the Diaconal Order provided by the current Warden, Deacon Karen McBride, followed by a short talk by Deacon Jacqueline herself [\*\*The Diaconal Order - The Methodist Church\*\*](#) section about Deacons!

Then to section headed For Churches then to Ministries, scroll I hope that this talk will have helped everyone to understand a bit more about the background in which the deacon has been appointed and

each deacon is trained and works, and we can welcome, support and work with her and Rev. Lansford Penn-Timothy as they join the staff of this circuit in September 2025.

---

A deacon wears a dog collar as a sign of servant hood and presbyteral ordination. Deacons also wear what is called a pectoral cross and this is a sign of membership and ordination into the Methodist Diaconal Order.

In a recent issue of the Methodist Recorder there was a very interesting article written by a retired deacon who looked back over her life as a deacon and which illustrated the history provided above. If you would like to read it please contact me, as the Methodist Recorder is not published online.

Some other links to interesting:

<https://youtu.be/UpMFdogjTdg>

[Deacon Jaqueline Esama-John](#)



## **Methodist Diaconal Order Rule of Life**

***Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. Proverbs 3: 5***

As a religious order we recognise the unconditional love of God as known in Jesus Christ. Out of this springs our calling to the sacrificial servant ministry of Christ and to be a dispersed community living by a rule of life.

***We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19***

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit to live a life of:

***Prayer***

***Witness***

***Service***

We seek to do these things through God's grace and by following the pattern of Jesus Christ who lived among us. In humility he washed the feet of his disciples and calls us to follow his example.

***For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Mark 10:45***

***Unless I wash you, you can have no share with me...I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. John 13: 1 – 20***

More can be found at:

[Living by a Rule - The Methodist Church](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about/the-diaconal-order/living-by-a-rule/)

[www.methodist.org.uk/about/the-diaconal-order/living-by-a-rule/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about/the-diaconal-order/living-by-a-rule/)