

Missional engagement?

The practical theology and ethics of 'good practice' for deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain

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Abstract

This contribution will explore the everyday practical theological reflections of deacons on their ministry as part of the Methodist Church in Britain. The Methodist Church in Britain's understandings will be set in a comparative perspective, locating these within the broad and controversial range of understandings of the diaconate which exist within Methodism and ecumenically. The presentation will show why deacons' ministry is so controversial, as it embodies many of the key theological, missional and ethical challenges facing the church in the current context. As deacons seek to connect forms of presence, service, discernment and witness within their work, whilst making connections and building relationships between diverse groups and seeking to enable others to engage in this work with them, they face many such issues and challenges. Drawing on findings from a major two year study, this presentation will reflect on deacons' responses to these issues and challenges, and explore what the wider Church might learn from them, as well as what might be learnt by setting these issues and challenges in a wider comparative perspective.

Author's notes:

1. This paper combined aspects of research findings published more formally in the following publications:
 - a. an article by Stockdale and Orton which explores the empirical data on deacons' understandings of their own ministry further, due to be published in a ***special edition of the free online 'Theology and Ministry' journal on diaconal ministry*** which will be made available from October 2013 at: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theologyandministry/>. This special journal edition has been developed out of the 'Making Connections: Exploring Contemporary Diaconal Ministry' conference that was held in Durham in September 2011 as part of the project (see <http://www.dur.ac.uk/wsc.online/?p=1418>), and will also include various articles developed from presentations that were made there.
 - b. a **journal article recently published in the 'International Journal of Practical Theology'** by the author, entitled "*The diverse and contested diaconate: Why understanding this ministry is crucial to the future of the Church*", available at: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/ijpt-2012-16-issue-2/ijpt-2012-0017/ijpt-2012-0017.xml?format=INT> . This article further explores issues surrounding the impact of the history of the Methodist Diaconal Order and relationships between ministries in the Church.
 - c. ***The executive summary of the full research findings***, which is now available to download for free at: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/wsc.online/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Executive-Summary-Document1.pdf> .
 - d. ***The full report*** will be published as a book later this year by Sacristy Press, and available through: <http://www.sacristy.co.uk/> .
2. The authors welcome any comments or correspondence about the issues raised in this paper: Tel. +44 (0) 191 334 1502; Email: a.j.orton@durham.ac.uk . Links to these resources and publications, including the full text where possible, will be made available from <http://www.dur.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?id=3292>, when they are released or after any delay necessary due to publisher's copyright restrictions.