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Status of document: Discussion document

URL <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2009/09/response-to-rev-dr-dion-fosters.html>

Response to Rev Dr Dion Foster's document regarding
"Ordained Deacons and the Sacraments"

At the outset I would like to explain that this document is not in any way an attempt to refute the content of the document referred to above, but rather to present an alternative view.

While acknowledging that the administration of the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion have been considered to be associated with the call of individuals to the Ordination to the Word and Sacrament, I understand Wesleyan tradition to be the introduction of practice which may be new and/or unique to specific situations – as directed by the acknowledged need of any given circumstance; and necessary for the *missio Dei* as understood by the church.

John Wesley, on the 12th April 1789 wrote:

April 12 (Dublin).--(Being Easter day.) We had a solemn assembly indeed; many hundred communicants in the morning, and in the afternoon far more hearers than our room would contain, though it is now considerably enlarged. Afterward I met the society and explained to them at large the original design of the Methodists, namely, not to be a distinct party but to stir up all parties, Christians or heathens, to worship God in spirit and in truth; but the Church of England in particular, to which they belonged from the beginning. With this view I have uniformly gone on for fifty years, never varying from the doctrine of the Church at all; nor from her discipline, of choice, but of necessity; so, in a course of years, necessity was laid upon me (as I have proved elsewhere) 1) to preach in the open air; 2) to pray extempore; 3) to form societies; 4) to accept of the assistance of lay preachers; and, in a few other instances, to use such means as occurred, to prevent or remove evils that we either felt or feared.

Today, the imposition of this Wesleyan tradition may mean that previously held 'sacred cows' become a sacrifice on the altar of expediency; as distasteful as the word may seem. Practical and appropriate changes may need to be made in order for the church to continue the facilitation of the *missio Dei*: [Or, as I see it, 'restored relationship with God, one another, ourselves and creation'. This could be phrased in more traditional, conventional terms, but while we are on the subject of 'the new' may I suggest that it is also time to renew many of our previously held, and outdated?, terms of reference with regard to our perception of God and our faith.]

Lay people (i.e. those not ordained through the imposition of the laying on of hands) are currently permitted to administer the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion on the strength of their witness to a personal call into the ordained ministry, this dispensation being granted for the period of their probation during which time this personal call is being tested, and the candidate equipped for service as a presbyter. I understand this practice to have been introduced in order to accommodate the needs of ministry in situations where there was (is?) no ordained

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clergy person to preside over the celebration of the sacraments. However, usage now speaks to a generally forgone conclusion that all? probationers have dispensation to administer the sacraments, irrespective of the presence or absence of ordained clergy. This suggests that 'intention to ordination' is sufficient to justify bypassing the condition of ordination before being allowed to baptize, and/or consecrate and/or serve the elements of Holy Communion.

Ordained Deacons of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa are now asking for the same opportunity to minister to the needs of those whom they serve, and who would benefit from the celebration of Holy Communion as an act of receiving and/or responding to the grace of God. While it is acknowledged that Deacons are ordained to a specific/specialized area of ministry and service, I would argue that it is reasonable to concede that there are occasions – within the practical outworking of their ministry – that being able to administer the sacrament would be to the benefit of the recipient of their ministry, and more fully communicate the grace of God in many situations. [Just as, on occasion, a presbyter might find God's love and grace more fully and completely expressed when serving in the same manner as is a deacon called to serve.]

With regard to the sacrament of baptism it is conceded that it would not be as necessary, since baptism (as currently practiced in the MCSA) implies acceptance into the body/family of the church. The aged, those who are homebound and those who are dying would not generally seek baptism as they would the comfort of the celebration of communion. Included in this would be the celebration – with the aged or dying – with the families involved; especially where they have met at the bedside of the one they love and may be about to 'loose', as they continue their journey Home. However, should the request of baptism be made, Methodist usage already allows for those other than ordained clergy to baptize; if the immediate situation so requires.

Lastly may I add:

- The presence of an ordained minister does not imply the availability of such a person.
- Secondly, I know it is currently possible to take elements which have been blessed by the minister in the context of a Sunday service. To the best of my knowledge this is intended to be an extension of the service to those who are home bound and not able to participate in the service and sacrament (and should occur as soon as possible after the service). This implies the extension of God's grace specifically to members of the church, and those who could/should have been attending a service. Deacons sometimes find themselves ministering to more than just Methodists, and often find that – in their ministry to both Methodists and others - it would be helpful/supportive/caring and a source of comfort in an immediate context, to be able to share communion without having to refer back to the Sunday service or keep the elements (which do not last indefinitely) for such occasions.
- A very real part of the Sacrament of Communion is the dedication of the elements and to deny the participants the opportunity of becoming aware of all

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aspects of the sacrament – each of which have a specific meaning and relevance – would be to deny the communicant the full benefit of the sacrament within which they are participating.

- The issue of part time non-itinerant ministers could be seen as a way around the issue of being able to celebrate the sacraments without commitment to the full implications (and sacrifice) of full time, itinerant, ordained ministry. [It would appear that the introduction of this category has, in some situations, been abused and misused.] Where do deacons stand in relation to this system?
- At the very real risk of turning to a possibly negative argument which may contain elements of judgment and blame, I need to ask: Is there a residue of gender issue involved? Until recently all deacons were women and part of the argument (still current in some denominations) is that the office of priest/minister/bishop can also be said to be that of representative of Christ. This has been a strong argument against women being ordained. If it has been recognized that women may enter ordained ministry (in spite of their gender denying their ability to represent of Christ), is it also not possible that deacons may be permitted – even called – to administer the sacrament.
- With reference to ‘call’ we see that there were women called to the ordained ministry. While their valid and ‘real’ calling burned within them, the church slowly moved to conceding to the fact that they were in fact called by God to Ordination, and only then could they fulfill their real call.

In the light of the above – and Wesley's example of change in order to meet the need of the situation – I ask that DEWCOM reconsider their decision and recommendation to Conference to permit – at the very least – an opportunity for deacons to apply for dispensation as and when the nature of their ministry would be enhanced by this opportunity. Tradition and history in the Methodist church allows this; need and context requires it, personal life experience and call asks for it, while Scripture does not forbid it.

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