

Deaconess: Order and Office

Sarah Lancaster

In his 2000 book *The Orders of Ministry in The United Methodist Church*, John Harnish writes: “One of the clear distinctions, then, between lay ministry and ordained ministry will be a commitment to and participation in the disciplined life of a covenant community of which one becomes a member by ordination for the sake of the whole church.” Harnish makes this statement in the context of explaining paragraphs about the Order of Elder and Order of Deacon that were introduced in the 1996 *Book of Discipline* (§§310-314). It might seem from this statement that belonging to an order is exclusively connected to ordination. However, the 2012 *Book of Discipline* uses the term Order of Deaconess and Home Missioner (§ 1316) for laywomen and laymen who give themselves to a lifetime of Christ-like service (and I note it also acknowledges the Order of St. Luke in ¶630.4.c and ¶1113.14). In other places, though, the *Discipline* uses the term Office of Deaconess (§ 1314). This paper will explore the use of the words “order” and “office” in the recent history of the United Methodist Church (including its predecessor bodies) and in the larger history of the Western church in order to determine their proper use with regard to deaconesses and home missionaries.

Confusion about the language of order and office is not new to Methodism. The Methodist Church undertook studies of ministry every few years after 1948, and there were some attempts to define the terms during that time. Unfortunately, those attempts did not produce consistent usage or clear reflection. In 1952, for instance, the ministry study report identified the word “order” with the divine endowment of ordination, and the word “office” referred to the human granting of status to perform a particular function. In the context of the time, this distinction served to uphold high regard for ordination even though the church continued the practice of authorizing lay ministers to administer sacraments in local congregations.¹ This attempt to clarify language is but one way that the persistent tension in our church between the roles of the ordained and the laity has manifested itself in studies of ministry.

By 1960, interest in the use of language had shifted from order and office to the word “minister.” Did a person need to be ordained to be a minister, or, assuming the Protestant idea of the priesthood of all believers, were all laypeople in ministry? The church struggled with questions of language, but it also remained committed to the idea that there can be no ordained laity. The 1964 ministry study proposed that there be only one order, namely the order of elder, and one office, namely the office of deacon. However, it also stated, “all ministerial orders are offices,” thus raising questions about the very distinction it was trying to make.² With the merger with the Evangelical United Brethren on the horizon, the 1964 ministry study was not accepted by General Conference. Problems of terminology and conceptualization were left unresolved, perhaps in the hope that negotiations in the merger would clarify many issues.

The Uniting Conference of 1968 recognized two orders of ministry, deacon and elder. Beginning in this year, paragraphs about the Order of Deacon and the Order of Elder appear in the *Discipline* (although the language is the same, the conception of these orders was different in 1968 than our current understanding). These paragraphs describe the position and responsibilities of deacon and elder, and the phrase “Word, Sacrament, and Order” begins to appear for elders. Tension between lay and ordained roles continued, and the 1976 ministry study began to speak of

¹ Richard Heitzenrater, “A Critical Analysis of the Ministry Studies Since 1948,” in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, eds. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1993) 431-47.

² Heitzenrater, 434

“general ministry” and “representative ministry” in order to describe the appropriate calling of each. The 1980 report on the study of ministry suggested establishing an order of diaconal ministers, but this proposal failed.³

Richard Heitzenrater analyzed the ministry studies from 1948 to 1988 and concluded, “The matter of orders as distinguished from offices has never been made clear in any official statement.” In order to understand how this language may be used for deaconesses, especially when we now describe deacons and elders as members of orders, we must first get some clarity about the language itself. The Methodist and United Methodist Church began using language that already had a complex history of use, and our confusion may lie at least in part in not understanding this history. I will examine some of the nuance that arises in the context of that larger history to try to shed light on our own particular use.

Catholic Understanding of Holy Orders

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the word “order” is connected to “ordination” through its basic meaning of giving each thing its proper place.⁴ To see a thing’s proper place, one must understand how that thing is in relation to others. With regard to ecclesiastical structure, order came to be seen as rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, so order came to be used only for clergy. The word can be used for the particular rank held by any of the ordained (such as, the episcopacy or the priesthood) or for the clergy (those “in orders”) as a whole as distinct from the laity. The word also is used for the action that raises a person to this rank, namely ordination using the sacrament of order. Collectively, the liturgical ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are known as Holy Orders.

“Office” is a word that pertains to the authority to perform certain ecclesiastical functions. To the extent that a function is connected to a particular order in the ecclesiastical structure, “order” and “office” may be used together. However, the word “office” also was used for ecclesiastical tasks that did not require ordination (although the ordained could also perform them).⁵ While “order” describes a place in a structure, the word “office” properly applies to positions held by people authorized to perform certain functions. The words may at times refer to the same position, but they highlight different aspects of that position, namely the place in the structure or the authorization to act.

This understanding of “order” and “office” is no doubt what informed much of the work of the ministry studies during the period Heitzenrater surveyed. The distinction between ordained and lay, the divine origin of ordination, and the human origin of office, or even alternatively the idea that order and office are interchangeable, the attempt to restrict “order” to elders and to use “office” for deacons, can all be understood against this complicated background. Each of these ideas has a rationale, but we have not always been careful to represent how each idea fits within the whole.

In addition to the ministry studies, the *Discipline* itself understood the orders of deacon and elder in light of this historic background. Starting in 1944, the *Discipline* of The Methodist Church contains a section called “Definition of Terms.” In that section, the term “Orders, Ministerial” is defined as “The office or status of a person in the Christian ministry. In The Methodist Church

³ Heitzenrater, 439.

⁴ *Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, s.v. “Holy Orders,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11279a.htm>. See also *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Holy Orders,” which emphasizes the sacramental understanding but still acknowledges hierarchy.

⁵ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Minor Orders,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10332b.htm>. See also *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Office.”

ministerial orders are of two classes: deacon's and elder's."⁶ Ministerial Orders is understood in the way that Holy Orders is understood, namely, to specify rank or place within an ecclesiastical structure. No definition of the word "office" is given, and in fact "office" is used in the definition of order, not to indicate a particular function, but rather a position (a status) within the structure. The Methodist Church did not have a clear distinction between "order" and "office" at that time.

Understanding orders of ministry in terms of ecclesiastical structure continued after the 1968 merger. Paragraphs using language of "The Order of Deacon" (§ 311) and "The Order of Elder" (§ 313) begin to appear in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. Although the glossary dropped out at this time, these paragraphs clearly treat "order" consistent with the idea of "ministerial order" that The Methodist Church had held. Deacon and Elder are described in these paragraphs with regard to their place in ecclesiastical structure, with a hierarchical sequence of the Order of Deacon leading to the Order of Elder.

In 1996, The United Methodist Church retained two ministerial orders, but it also reconceived those ministerial orders to eliminate any suggestion of rank in a hierarchy. Where previously the order of deacon was a step on the way to the order of elder, now each is an order unto itself, not equivalent (interchangeable) but equal to each other. The two orders still constitute positions in ecclesiastical structure, but this structure is not considered to be a hierarchy. The history of and tendency toward hierarchy is so strong that we often create a de facto hierarchy in our assumptions and actions. This tendency, though, must be resisted in order to realize the ecclesial structure that was intended by the 1996 action.

Understanding of Religious Orders

With the reorganization of ministry that took place at the 1996 General Conference, The United Methodist Church adopted a shift in conceptuality that is reflected in the remarks by Harnish that I quoted at the beginning of this paper. The paragraphs in the *Discipline* on the Order of Deacon and Order of Elder introduced a meaning of the word "order" that comes from a very different context. Rather than explaining ministerial orders, these paragraphs from 1996 onward rely on an understanding of "religious order," so they include paragraphs that talk about the purpose, organization, and membership in an order. These ideas do not express the purpose, organization or membership in a rank within an ecclesiastical structure, but rather in a covenant community.

Religious orders and ministerial orders in ecclesiastical structure are different enough from each other that it is important to give some attention to what "order" means in the former context to understand what this shift in conceptuality means. The early founders of religious orders were not concerned with establishing a class within ecclesiastical hierarchy, but rather with establishing a plan of living that enabled people to aspire to a holy life before God.⁷ Religious orders, then, are not (like ministerial orders) ranks or positions in a structure but rather are communities (congregations) within the church of people who share a vocation and who find support for carrying out that vocation in relationship with each other. Ordination is not necessarily connected to religious orders. In other churches, although the ordained may be members of an order, this membership does not happen by virtue of ordination. What holds the community together is not a vocation to Holy Orders, but rather the commitment to live according to common vows, or to live under a specific rule. The traditional vows are to chastity, poverty, and obedience (known as evangelical counsels). A religious order, then, calls for an ordered life, but not necessarily a life within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

⁶ *The Book of Discipline*, 1952, p. 670.

⁷ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Religious Life," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12748b.htm>

Historically, religious orders have offered laypeople an opportunity to pursue their calling to be Christian with a kind of seriousness that is difficult to achieve in ordinary life.

Adding the meaning of religious order to our understanding of ministerial order has the potential of providing needed support, discipline, and encouragement to those who are called to ordination. It does not seem, though, that this potential has been realized across our Church. One of the factors that may inhibit the full realization of this potential is that covenant community cannot be made by legislative action. Those who already held ministerial orders before 1996 did not have commitment to a religious order in mind as they sought ordination. Perhaps we will grow into this potential more as new generations who do have this understanding are brought into their respective orders.

It would be very salutary for the church for Deacons and Elders to gain a sense of being in a covenant community, and this benefit to them need not be denied. In fact, it should be encouraged because of what Methodist vocation is (a topic treated below). But the conflation of the meaning of religious orders with ministerial orders confuses the situation of deaconesses. These meanings must be kept distinct in order to think clearly about how both order and office can apply to deaconesses.

Order of Deaconesses

At the 1888 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the work that some women had already been doing was recognized and the General Conference called for the establishment of Boards in annual conferences to oversee the work of Deaconesses. Deaconesses were already established in England and on the continent of Europe, so some minimal knowledge in the United States of their work helped the men who made the decision in the MEC accept the idea.⁸

Very early, deaconesses were thought of as a religious order. One of the topics for discussion at the second Ecumenical Methodist Conference in 1891 was “The Church and Her Agencies.” The word “agencies” in this topic does not refer to formal organizations, such as “boards” or “committees,” but rather to agents who do work. Methodists around the world were struggling with how to distinguish between but also support both the work of the ordained and of the laity. Within the context of this larger discussion, Bishop W.X. Ninde of the Methodist Episcopal Church gave an address on “The Deaconess Movement.” The bishop’s address followed the reading of an essay “The Place and Power of Lay Agency in the Church,” and I suppose the topic of deaconesses was intended to raise up a particular example of the agency of laywomen, but a few of the speakers in the discussion regretted the mixing of topics because it deflected attention from discussion about the agency of laymen, which also required serious reflection. Although the term “deaconess” does “feminize” this lay ministry, the recent inclusion of home missionaries to the deaconess movement attempts to conceive the commitment to service by laywomen and laymen without putting them into competition, but rather developing and supporting them together.

In his address, Bishop Ninde calls the deaconess movement “a novelty,” but he also describes the act taken by the MEC as restoring “the ancient Order of Deaconesses.” The movement, then, was at the same time new to Methodism and rooted in early Christianity. The bishop praised the movement’s success, but he also acknowledged that it had received criticism. Some felt that the movement imitated Roman Catholicism, presumably as a religious order for women who lived and worked together and wore distinctive garb. He also acknowledges another

⁸ Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* (New York: Women’s Division, General Board of Global Ministries, 1997), 38-43.

criticism he takes to be more serious, namely, that the Order of Deaconesses might contribute to the destruction of the home by taking women out of their proper sphere. The bishop countered both of these criticisms by pointing out the difference between a “Methodist sisterhood” that requires no vows and Catholic sisterhood that does, and by expressing confidence in the spiritual clarity of women along with the conviction that God will use women to save the world.⁹ I suspect that, even though anti-Catholic sentiment produced criticism of the idea, using the language of Order and tying it to an ancient practice was a way of justifying the “novelty” of authorizing women for work in the church at a time when such work was just beginning to be conceivable.

Later that day, the meeting of this Ecumenical Methodist Conference spent time specifically discussing women’s agency. It included a reading of an essay on “Woman’s Work in the Church,” by Benjamin St. James Fry. This essay was an appeal to make better use of women’s gifts for the work of Christ in the world, including as deaconesses. The reading of the essay was followed by two addresses on the topic, and each of these addresses opened the question of whether women’s work in the church should include preaching. In the discussion that followed, it was noted that no women were present among the conference members to speak for themselves. Opinions among the men were mixed; some were open to women’s participation in any work to which God called them, and others were concerned to limit women from ordination and decision-making in the church. As J.M. Buckley of the MEC summed up the discussion, “We all agree that it is right for women to speak and pray in public, to become deaconesses, to lead class, to teach in Sabbath-schools, to explain the Scriptures with or without a text. Where do we divide? It is upon the question whether or not women should be admitted to the law-making bodies of the Church, and be ordained ministers, and be appointed to pastorates.”¹⁰ Although it was generally agreed that women might participate in a religious order, it was not agreed that they could be included in ministerial orders.

Certainly, in the late 19th century before the ordination of women was a serious possibility, no one would confuse the “Order of Deaconesses” with ministerial orders.¹¹ Another factor, though, may also have worked against such confusion. The record of the proceedings of this Ecumenical Methodist Conference shows that participants often used the word “office” to talk about ordained ministry. In fact, one question that arose at this meeting was whether Methodists should use the word “order” to talk about clergy. The opening essay on lay agency included this question raised by James Travis of the Primitive Methodist Church: “What constitutes the difference between the clergy and the laity? Is the difference organic or only functional? Is it one of order, or simply one of office?” The wording of these questions suggests that, following the historic use of these words, order indicates something built into the very structure of the Church, while office indicates a function that persons are set apart and authorized to perform. In the discussion that followed, J.S. Simon of the Wesleyan Methodist Church replied that it was clear John Wesley intended “a distinct order of men who should administer the sacraments.”¹² This expressed difference of opinion about the word “order” did not dominate the conversation. Rather, throughout the record of the proceedings, “office” seems to have been a fairly common way to refer to ordained ministry. Perhaps also for that reason, “Order of Deaconesses” could be clearly understood as religious order without suggesting anything about ministerial order.

⁹ *Proceedings of the second Ecumenical Methodist Conference held in the Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church, October 1891, Washington* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1892), 276-78.

¹⁰ *Proceedings*, 306.

¹¹ As women began to seek to expand opportunities for leadership in the Church, the MEC began to include paragraphs in the *Discipline* that specified how the word “laymen” and the pronouns “he, him, and his” were to be understood. Women were allowed to hold positions of Steward, Class Leader, and Sunday School Superintendent, but they were explicitly barred from licensing as local preachers and from ordination. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1896, ¶29-31.

¹² *Proceedings*, 269, 285.

This record of the Ecumenical Methodist Conference shows that already in the late 19th century, the use of “order” and “office” had not been clearly sorted out. Any uncertainty, though, about these terms had no effect on thinking about the Order of Deaconesses because the question about whether ordination constituted an order or office only pertained to those who were eligible for ordination, which at the time were only men. The question about whether ordained ministry was a distinct rank in the structure of the church mattered because of what that implied about the difference between clergymen and laymen. It seems clear at that time that order referred to a place in the ecclesiastical structure, whereas office referred to authorization without necessarily implying rank in a structural hierarchy.

At first, deaconesses in the MEC were authorized for their work through the Board of Deaconesses, which issued certificates to them. By 1896, the MEC Discipline included in its rituals a consecration service for deaconesses. This ritual includes the words “I admit thee to the office of Deaconess in the Church of God, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” With this declaration, deaconess was recognized as an authorized office within the church. Membership in this religious order, then, included authorization to do work on behalf of the church.

The language of “office” began to dominate the understanding of deaconess. Those *Disciplines* that define ministerial orders in its list of terms also speak of the *office* of deaconess, saying, “This office entitles a woman to serve The Methodist Church through any of its agencies in any capacity not requiring full clergy rights” (§1252). In the same *Disciplines*, the word “office” was used both in the definition of “orders, ministerial,” and in the paragraph for deaconesses. Although no clear definition of the word “office” was given, it seems to carry the traditional flexible nuance of the word, namely for authorization, whether of an ordained position in ecclesiastical structure or of a lay position. The 2012 *Book of Discipline* continues to use the word “office” with that flexibility. It can call the two orders of ministry “ordained offices” (§134), that is, the members of these orders are authorized to perform the functions appropriate to these orders in the structure, while at the same time speaking of the bishops and district superintendents as “offices” (§402), that is, as specialized, authorized roles within the order of elder. Just as the episcopacy is an authorized position among the ordained, deaconess and home missionary is an authorized position among the laity. Although the usual language used for deaconesses has shifted from order to office, the intent to provide women an opportunity in the Church for Christian service without ordination remains.

With this background, it seems clear that both the word “order” and the word “office” have a place in the history of deaconesses. Additionally, the distinct meanings of those words show how they both may be used for deaconesses and home missionaries today. The word “office” indicates that deaconesses and home missionaries have been authorized to do work on behalf of the Church. The word “order” does not refer to ministerial order in the ecclesiastical structure (understood technically, as will be explained in the next section), but rather indicates that these persons have entered into a covenant community with each other so that they may support one another and hold each other accountable in their authorized work.

Church Structure

Typically, theologians distinguish between the nature and the mission of the church. This distinction has never been intended to separate the two, but rather to focus attention for thorough reflection about what the church is and what the church does. Recently, though, some concern has

been expressed that such a distinction creates a false dichotomy between being and doing and elevates nature over mission.

The church needs structure, and in ecclesiology, reflection on that structure is usually focused on the ordained ministry as part of the reflection about the nature of the church. Church bodies commonly have ministerial structure, but they do not have one ministerial structure in common. Even across Methodist churches, ministry is structured in different ways (for instance, not all Methodist churches have bishops). Even within the relatively brief history of The United Methodist Church, ministry has been structured in different ways.

Broadly conceived, church structure may include much more than ministerial orders (for instance, our Boards and Commissions belong to a broad conception of church structure as an institution), but in ecclesiology, ministerial orders have traditionally become the focus of thinking about church structure for many churches because they help to ensure that the life of the church is actualized effectively. It is so important that in some views of ecclesiology, orders of ministry are essential to the very constitution of the church. In these views, this is so primarily because the ordained ministry is responsible for the administration of the sacraments, which make the church the church. For this reason, ministerial orders have been a necessary component of reflection in ecclesiology, while lay religious orders have not. Lay religious orders may be extremely helpful for people to commit themselves to holy living, but they do not constitute the church as church. The way that churches structure themselves to enable the devotion and ministry of lay people has not had the centrality for ecclesiological reflection that the orders of ministry have had. For this reason, when we are in conversation with other churches about ecclesiology, we are primarily expected to explain our ministerial orders, and other aspects of the organization of our structure may be of interest, but are less central to the conversation.

The centrality of ministerial orders for reflection about the nature of the church arose because they have served to guarantee that the sacraments needed for the life of the church are present. The sacraments offer to us the *koinonia* (“communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places”)¹³ that the Church makes available as the body of Christ. Despite this necessary function, ministerial orders do not by themselves guarantee the vitality of the church or the spiritual life of its members. It was the need for the administration of the sacraments that forced Methodism to take on ecclesiastical structure (ministerial order), but our own history as Methodists bears witness to how organization for vital piety in societies was not made unnecessary by ministerial order in the Church of England. But neither did organization into societies make ministerial order unnecessary. Because Methodist piety encourages the frequent use of the sacraments as essential to vital piety, it will always depend on the ministerial structure that makes those sacraments available. Methodism is actualized most fully when there is both ministerial order and order for holy living.

As interest in avoiding a nature and mission dichotomy in ecclesiology grows, it is possible to recognize that *diakonia* is also part of the being of the church. The church does not exist for itself, but rather it exists in order to participate in God’s activity to transform the world.¹⁴ United Methodists have anticipated this insight by establishing two distinct but equal orders of ministry. Our church structure now includes not only a ministerial order to provide the sacraments but also a ministerial order that focuses the church on its mission.

¹³ TCTCV, ¶67

¹⁴ TCTCV, ¶13.

Not all Christians are called to ordination. Ecclesiological reflection that makes ministerial orders key for understanding the church can ignore the presence and importance of most of the members of the body of Christ. Much ecclesiological reflection has been so focused on ecclesiastical hierarchy that laypeople did not seem to have much of a place in the church at all. Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has begun to develop the image of the “People of God” for ecclesiological reflection as a corrective to this historic hierarchical understanding. The rediscovery of the contribution of laypeople to the church is an important lesson of our time. After all, one of the primary ways that the Church engages the world is through the way laypeople carry on their daily lives. The witness and the service of laypeople may be the primary way that many come to have any idea of what Christian faith is. The Church cannot carry out its mission to participate in God’s activity to transform the world without such witness and service.

As is evidenced by discussion of lay agency at the second Ecumenical Methodist Conference, the importance of the laity is not a new insight for Methodism. We have always known the value and power of laypeople, even if we have not always known how to bring that to expression in the way we speak about ministry or ministerial orders. The struggle with how to regard the perpetual tension we seem to have about the roles of the ordained and the laity is longstanding. Thinking about deaconesses and home missionaries, as both an office and as an order may actually be a helpful prod to us to think more deeply about how to navigate that tension. To see how, we must explore the idea of vocation.

Methodist Vocation

Both ministerial orders and religious orders use the language of vocation. In the former, there is a calling not only by God but also by the church to be in a particular ministry set apart by ordination. In the latter, persons are called by God to consecrated lives, so they dedicate themselves to living out the call to be Christian as fully as possible. Because it is so easy to frequently, and almost exclusively, use the language of call to talk about the journey toward ordination, we can forget the biblical idea expressed by Paul that the followers of Jesus are “called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). The idea, however, that Christians are called to be sanctified (made holy) is deeply Methodist. The word that Paul uses, which is translated into English as “saints,” is *hagiois*, which means “holy.” John Wesley understood the very goal of Christian faith to be holiness and happiness. The privilege of every Christian, not just those in Holy Orders, was to have the grace to conquer sin so that she or he could lead a holy life.

In fact, Wesley understood the restoration of holiness as an essential dimension to the full understanding of salvation. Although we were made in the image of God to be happy in God, the fall has distorted the image of God in us. What we need and what Jesus Christ provides is a way for that image to be restored in us. A fallen image of God does not reflect God, but a restored image reflects the holiness of God in a holy life. Wesley thought through his understanding of the way of salvation by considering how we respond to what God does to lead us into the holy life and happy relationship with God that God intended for human beings all along. This is the vocation that we all share. Any other more particular vocation that we may have comes in service of this common vocation.

Although our tradition has not typically used the language of the priesthood of all believers, it has called every Christian to scriptural holiness. From the beginning Wesley’s theology about the way of salvation informed the Methodist mission to spread scriptural holiness over the land. No one was to be denied opportunity to pursue this calling. Young or old, women or men, educated or uneducated, poor or rich, all need to follow the way God has set before us to scriptural holiness.

Furthermore, none needed to be left to follow this way alone. Wesley structured Methodism into societies where Christians could pursue holy lives in the company of others.

Albert Outler has described Wesley's vision for Methodism as an "evangelical order." With this phrase, he uses "order" as "religious order," that is, a covenant community with a plan of living so persons help each other live holy lives before God. Outler points out that Wesley's original organization of the Holy Club was influenced by the monasticism he had learned about from reading certain Eastern theologians.¹⁵ The structure he originally conceived for Methodism was not a new church, but rather a way of organizing Christians within the church to pursue holiness with support and accountability.¹⁶ If Methodists did not have a fully developed and detailed rule like the Rule of St. Benedict, they had General Rules for the Societies to guide them. They had spiritual leaders. They had accountability to one another. Even without taking the traditional vows associated with religious orders, they had a way of ordering their lives to become more holy before God. Wesley found a way for ordinary people to pursue a holy life before God without leaving their daily responsibilities. A Methodist need not live in a special religious community in order to have community support to be serious about one's life before God. In this way, the evangelical order Outler imagined Methodism to be borrowed the idea of a disciplined life from other religious orders, but it did not replicate everything about the life of those orders.

This holiness for all is the essence of Methodist vocation. One might even say that if Outler was right in his description of Wesley's vision, organization for life in an "evangelical order" is the central calling for Methodism. This organization does not mean belonging to communities set apart from the world. Wesley's insight into organization was that the ordered life toward a vocation of holiness could be achieved in communities in the midst of the world. Although members of the societies did not take the traditional vows, the seriousness of devotion was maintained. If this is our vocation as Methodists, then The United Methodist Church cannot overlook the importance of communities for serious devotion to God.

Where once Methodism could exist as a society within the Church of England, The United Methodist Church now stands as a church among other churches. In this situation, it has been hard to hold onto and promote our central calling. Now that The United Methodist Church is not an "evangelical order" within a church but rather a church itself, it stands as other churches do in need of something like religious orders within it to keep its original vocation alive. We now stand in the position of a church with ministerial order that exists for very important reasons, but which cannot by itself guarantee the vital piety that Methodism has stood for. Our history can illumine this situation well if we read it not just as who we have been but who we need to be. United Methodists need Methodist societies. The move in 1996 toward conceiving ministerial orders as equal orders of covenant communities is an important step in this direction.

Furthermore, as we have taken on ecclesiastical structure, we have also taken on the tendency to divide clergy and laity from one another and elevate the calling to ministerial orders above the shared calling of all Christians to be sanctified. The suggestion that what distinguishes the ordained ministry from the lay ministry is participation in the covenant community of an order only

¹⁵ Albert C. Outler, "Towards a Re-appraisal of John Wesley as a Theologian" in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. by Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 39-54.

¹⁶ Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. by Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 211-226.

exacerbates this problem. It also removes from the laity the very reason for Methodism in the first place, namely the ability to pursue a plan of life in covenant community that will bring them closer to God. As important as it is for clergy to be organized into covenant communities, clergy orders cannot be the only way that the church orders its life for holy living. We need more covenant communities, not fewer, to follow the vocation that has been given to Methodism.

A church (rather than an order) may need to think of its mission as more than spreading scriptural holiness, but certainly a church in the Methodist tradition ought to include spreading scriptural holiness in its mission. People who are called to Holy Orders should live holy lives, but the call to holy living is surely not restricted to people in Holy Orders. Many pastors can tell stories about how they have been inspired by the faith and service of people in the congregations to which they give oversight. Scriptural holiness cannot be what distinguishes the ordained and the laity if we are to remain true to our Methodist heritage. By offering a place for laywomen and laymen to commit themselves fully to Christ-like service, deaconesses and home missionaries as an order remind The United Methodist Church of the vocation of the laity and provide an opportunity to follow this calling.

Deaconesses and Home Missioners as an Order

As an order, deaconesses and home missionaries stand in the long tradition of lay religious orders in the church and in the tradition of societies within Methodism. When it was formed in the late 19th century, the idea of an Order of Deaconesses was to restore an ancient order of sisterhood that would allow women to answer a call to Christian service without confusing that call with a call to ordination. Now that women are being ordained within The United Methodist Church, the need to divert every woman's call to ministry into lay service is not the driving reason for this order. The vision that Wesley had for Methodism, though, provides good reason for such an order. It is worth noting, also, that the existence of this order means that in our own time, not every person's call to ministry needs to be directed to ordination. Women, as well as men, need to be able to respond to the particular call that God gives, recognizing that God's call may be to many different kinds of service.

How does the Order of Deaconesses and Home Missioners function as an order in the Methodist tradition? In the consecration service for deaconesses and home missionaries, the bishop asks, "Will you be diligent in prayer, in the reading of the Holy Scriptures, in mutual relationship with the communities you serve and in all other means of grace available to you?" The persons being consecrated, then, commit themselves to works of piety. Furthermore, as they are consecrated to life-long work of love, justice, and service, these persons also commit themselves to works of mercy. Their plan of life for Christ-like service, then, makes use of the full scope of the means of grace that John Wesley commended to Methodists.

Furthermore, in the consecration service, deaconesses and home missionaries commit themselves to "mutually supportive ministry as part of a covenant community." Although they serve across the nation, they agree to "accept responsibility for participation in" this community. This community does gather together regularly, with high participation, so they have direct support from one another. Additionally, the consecration service acknowledges more than only this United Methodist community. By joining this order, these persons enter into relationship with others in a world diaconate that goes beyond Methodism. The community to which they belong, then, is ecumenical.

In promoting works of piety, works of mercy, covenant community, and commitment to a church that is larger than itself, the Order of Deaconesses and Home Missioners follows the model

of the original Methodist societies. In following this model, the Order serves as an example for the possibility for all laypeople to live more holy lives. The Order also serves as an example for the ordained to take seriously their own commitment to live in the covenant community of an order with each other.

Deaconess and Home Missioner as Office

Recognizing deaconesses and home missionaries as an order in the sense of a religious order does not, though, mean these positions are ministerial orders. The distinction between these two kinds of orders has been blurred by The United Methodist Church in recent years, but the distinction is necessary for understanding deaconesses and home missionaries. Persons who join the Order of Deaconesses and Home Missioners do not enter into ministerial orders, but rather are given an office. They are authorized as laypeople to perform service on behalf of the church. By virtue of this office, deaconesses and home missionaries have a place in the structure of the church broadly conceived, but not in that more narrow structure (ministerial order) that has traditionally been connected to the nature of the church.

Because this authorization is for lifetime service by and on behalf of the Church, this vocation is distinct from other lay ministries. The difficulty of articulating that distinction through the past few decades is documented in the final chapters of *My Calling to Fulfill*. Over its history, The United Methodist Church has adopted a number of ways to encourage, authorize, and value lay ministry. The office of deaconess (and now home missioner) has a long and vital history in Methodism of providing a structure through which lay ministry may flourish. Its call to lifetime service distinguishes it from other forms of lay ministry that may be temporary. As an office that is held within a religious order, its authorization commits persons not only to a particular work, but also to lives of scriptural holiness, including lifetime commitment to the community that will support them and hold them accountable according to the Methodist tradition.

Conclusion

Deaconesses and home missionaries are both an order and an office, but not in the same way that deacons and elders are both an order and an office. Although there is much overlap, there is also an important distinction. Deaconesses and home missionaries have an authorized position in the broad structure of the church to carry out ministry, and they exist in a covenant community to support the ministry of the office, but the place they occupy in the structure of the church is not within the ministerial order to which only deacons and elders belong.

Because they are both order and office, deaconesses and home missionaries point to very important insights for The United Methodist Church. As an order, they remind The United Methodist Church of its proper vocation as Methodist, especially as this vocation pertains to the laity. Covenant community should not distinguish the ordained from the laity (and in fact, historically, lay and clergy have often been members together in religious orders). Rather participation in covenant community ought to be what identifies ordained and laity alike as belonging to this particular Methodist tradition.

As an office, they remind The United Methodist Church that the laypeople may have their own proper authorization for ministry. Since 1996 The United Methodist Church has moved away from using rank as the image for understanding ministerial orders, and deaconesses and home missionaries function to remind the church that rank is not a proper way to conceive of the difference between the ordained and the laity either. Distinction matters, but it must be explained in some other

framework than hierarchy. Although lay ministries abound, having an office in the church for laypeople helps the church remain mindful of the importance of the whole people of God for doing God's work. Not all laypeople will have the call to be authorized in this way, just as not all are called to ordination, and not all of the ordained have the call to the episcopacy.

The order and office of deaconess and home missionary are not only historically important to The United Methodist Church, they are theologically important. Serious reflection on this position in the church is long overdue, and it can open up important opportunities for shaping our ecclesiology more clearly.