

# **Local Preachers and Readers**

## ***Sharing Two Ministries***

*A briefing note by John Cole, member of the Joint Implementation Commission for the Anglican-Methodist Covenant – and formerly National Adviser (Unity in Mission) for the Church of England.*

### **Foreword**

**by the Co-Chairs of the Joint Implementation Commission  
for the Anglican-Methodist Covenant**

Following the success of the recently-published briefing note on ‘Deaneries and Circuits – Partners in Mission’, we welcome this new booklet exploring how Readers in the Church of England and Local Preachers in the Methodist Church can share their distinctive ministries.

John Cole presents the basic facts about Local Preachers and Readers and how they fit into the life of our Churches, and then offers insights into how the two ministries can be shared so that each can enrich the other.

As with the previous booklet, this is not an official publication of either Church. However, on behalf of the Joint Implementation Commission, we commend it warmly.

Rt Revd Ian Cundy  
(Bishop of Peterborough)

Professor Peter Howdle  
(former Vice-President of the  
Methodist Conference)

## **Acknowledgements**

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John Cole

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# Local Preachers and Readers

## *Sharing Two Ministries*

### Introduction

In the Methodist Church of Great Britain, when a lay person stands in the pulpit to preach, he or she will most probably be a Local Preacher. When the same thing happens in the Church of England, the person preaching is most likely to be a Reader.

From the perspective of those in the pew, it can easily seem that here are two roles that are, or ought to be, interchangeable. In the context of an Anglican-Methodist Covenant, why should all Readers not be accepted as Local Preachers and vice versa?

In this booklet we take a closer look at the distinctive roles of these two groups of people in the life of our two Churches, and explore the possibility that, while interchangeability may be attractive, there may be a better path to follow. Could it be that both Churches will be richer – and more serviceable to God’s mission – if the individual contribution of Local Preachers to the Church of England and of Readers to the Methodist Church is seen more in terms of a covenantal sharing of two distinct but overlapping ministries?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of the concept of sharing two ministries, see Chapter Four of ‘Living God’s Covenant’, the second interim report of the Joint Implementation Commission for the Anglican-Methodist Covenant 2007.

# ***Local Preachers in the Methodist Church***

## **KEY FEATURES**

- Unlike other lay offices and appointments within the Methodist Church, Local Preachers are appointed ‘for life’.<sup>2</sup>
- Local Preachers can exercise their role in any part of the Connexion, and their status is transferred with them whenever they move circuits.
- Selection and training is a carefully graded and demanding process.
- Local Preachers are full, active and indispensable members of the ministry team of a circuit. They are deployed routinely by the circuit Superintendent Minister to conduct worship and to preach in local churches and they thus become widely known and respected throughout the circuit.
- Across the Methodist Connexion it is estimated that Local Preachers conduct seven out of every ten Methodist services, either in their own circuit or in others where they are invited as ‘visiting preachers’. They have overall responsibility for the act of worship, although they are to seek to work collaboratively with others in leading worship.
- Historically in the Methodist Church, the normal route to becoming a minister has been through being a Local Preacher – and today for most presbyters having been a Local Preacher

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<sup>2</sup> Subject to relevant Methodist disciplines and the requirements of safeguarding legislation.

is very much part of their identity, although on ordination they become 'Itinerant' preachers rather than 'Local' preachers.

- The same route is not required for those being ordained to the diaconate and admitted to the Methodist Diaconal Order, although a number of deacons are also Local Preachers, and remain so whilst ministering as deacons.
- In the circuit, all presbyters and Local Preachers meet quarterly in the Local Preachers' Meeting (commonly known as 'the Preachers' Meeting') – a time for mutual support, prayer, study and strategic thinking. The Local Preachers' Meeting has a significant formal role in every circuit, holding Local Preachers to account and supervising those in training.
- Alongside Local Preachers, the Methodist Church has in recent years introduced a new category of locally-authorized Worship Leaders, who take part in various aspects of leading worship, but do not preach and do not have overall charge of the particular service.

# ***Readers in the Church of England***

## **KEY FEATURES**

- Readers are admitted ‘for life’<sup>3</sup> – just like Local Preachers, and unlike most other lay appointments in the Church of England. Their role is transferable between dioceses – subject to their being licensed by the bishop, who will also specify where they may exercise their ministry.
- Individuals can be licensed to a parish, a benefice, a deanery, or to the whole diocese. Licences need to be renewed whenever there is a change of bishop or incumbent.<sup>4</sup>
- As with Local Preachers, the process of selection and the training of Readers is rigorous and demanding. Each diocese is responsible for its own programme of training, to standards moderated by the Ministry Division of the Archbishops’ Council.
- The role of the Reader can include a wide range of ministerial responsibilities that may benefit from the Reader’s theological competence.
- Of these the Reader’s catechetical role of preaching and teaching is best known and is universal across all dioceses of

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3 Subject to relevant Church of England disciplines and the requirements of safeguarding legislation.

4 Readers’ licences are not renewed after age 70, but the individual is usually given ‘Permission To Officiate’.

the Church of England. In some dioceses Readers are expected to do no more than this.

- However, the role of a Reader, as specified in the Canons, is threefold:

*To visit the sick, to read and pray with them, to teach in Sunday school and elsewhere, and generally to undertake such pastoral and educational work and to give such assistance to any minister as the bishop may direct (Canon E4.2 (a))*

*during the times of divine service to read Morning and Evening Prayer (save for the Absolution), to publish banns of marriage ..., to read the word of God, to preach, to catechize the children, and to receive and present the offerings of the people (Canon E4.2 (b))*

*to distribute the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the people. (Canon E4.2 (c))*

- A Reader can thus be invited to preach or lead the 'Service of the Word' in situations where a weekly service of Holy Communion is the normal routine. However, the Reader's role in these services is at the priest's discretion.
- Canon E4.2A also makes it possible for a Reader to be licensed to take funerals, but this will depend on diocesan policy and the individual's personal circumstances.
- In rural areas, where a Reader is licensed to a multi-parish benefice or to a deanery, taking services and preaching is likely to form a more significant part of the Reader's role than in a more urban setting. In this context the parallels with the role of the Local Preacher are most apparent.

- Apart from preaching and leading worship, many Readers undertake significant responsibilities in other contexts, e.g. training for baptism and confirmation, pastoral visiting etc, according to their individual gifting.
- In contrast to Methodist practice, selection and training for ordained ministry requires no prior involvement in Reader ministry – and ordained ministers are often perceived as failing to appreciate the Reader’s role.
- In the deanery, the ordained ministers meet at Chapter meetings for mutual support, prayer, study and strategic thinking. Readers may be, but are by no means always, invited to join them.
- Traditionally Readers have met in ‘Areas’ for mutual support and further training. These Areas have sometimes borne little relationship to other church boundaries. However, as more responsibility is entrusted to deaneries, many dioceses are re-aligning their Reader Areas to fit in with deanery boundaries.
- As the range of authorised lay ministries increases, and questions are asked about the potential for a distinctive (often mistakenly called ‘permanent’) diaconate, many Readers see the distinctiveness of their ministry as being under threat.<sup>5</sup>
- At least three dioceses in the Church of England no longer use the title ‘Reader’ but license lay people as “Licensed Lay Ministers”.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2007 the Church of England’s Faith and Order Advisory Group published an important report “The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church” addressing these issues.



## **Why not ‘interchangeability’?**

*‘Interchangeability’ of ordained ministries is rightly seen as one of the more urgent goals within the Covenant between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.*

*This makes sense, since presbyters and deacons are two of the three historic ‘orders’ within the universal Church and both our Churches believe we are ordaining into the diaconate and the priesthood/presbyterate of the whole Church of God.*

*Bishops, of course, make up the third ‘order’ – hence the significance of the ongoing debates about bishops within the Methodist Church in Great Britain and about women being bishops in the Church of England.*

*Similar arguments, however, do not apply to Local Preachers and Readers. The roles of the two groups take their shape from the way each of the two Churches is organised. In fact, as shown in these pages, Local Preachers and Readers perform different albeit overlapping functions, and are trained accordingly.*

*It just so happens that the individual gifts and training of a Local Preacher are likely to equip that person to fulfil very well many of the roles undertaken by a Reader in the Church of England. And the same will be true of a Reader in the context of the Methodist Church.*

*Subject to the disciplines of the two Churches, it is perfectly possible for individuals to be accredited to serve at the same time as a Local Preacher in the Methodist Church and a Reader in the Church of England.*

*There is, however, no universal ‘order of lay ministry’ to which both Readers and Local Preachers claim to belong. While our two Churches retain their existing polities, there is no compelling reason for the roles to be merged.*

## **Readers**

### ***Offering their gifts to the Methodist Church***

Individual Readers may, with appropriate permission,<sup>6</sup> accept invitations to lead Methodist worship and preach.

The invitation would come from the Methodist Circuit – initially most probably at the suggestion of a local congregation where the Reader was already known. All those who stand in Methodist pulpits are required to preach nothing at variance with the doctrines of the Methodist Church.<sup>7</sup>

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6 The formal requirements are set out in Canon B43(6)(b).

7 If this appears to be problematic, two quotations may be helpful – from paragraphs in the Anglican-Methodist Covenant Common Statement:

“A careful comparison of Anglican and Methodist formularies and of more recent doctrinal statements will show that the two churches stand side by side in confessing the fundamental apostolic faith as it has been received in the orthodox Christian tradition.” (110)

“Methodists and Anglicans do not necessarily confess the faith in the same idioms or with the emphases always in the same places. Moreover, there is diversity within each of the two churches as well as between them.” (111)

## THREE WAYS IN FOR READERS

### *a) As a 'Visiting Preacher'*

The Reader can appear on the Circuit's preaching plan simply as a 'Visiting Preacher.' Although the Reader may be invited quite frequently, each service he or she leads is technically by separate invitation.

### *b) As a person 'Authorised to serve as a Local Preacher'*

If the Reader is licensed to a Local Ecumenical Partnership where the Methodist Church is a partner, the Reader 'may apply to be authorised to serve as a local preacher' in the circuit of which the LEP is a part (SO566B(1)). In situations other than a Local Ecumenical Partnership, if the Reader is likely to be preaching frequently in the circuit, the Reader 'may apply to be authorised to serve as a local preacher' (SO566B(2)). If the application is successful, he or she will become a member of the Local Preachers' Meeting – a responsibility that ought to be taken very seriously. The requirements of those 'Authorised to serve as a Local Preacher' are, however, quite stringent, including meeting connexional standards of training.

### *c) As a Local Preacher*

Any Reader who is also a member of the Methodist Church (or chooses to become a member)<sup>8</sup> and is able and willing to fulfil his

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<sup>8</sup> A person who wishes to become a member of the Methodist Church is not required to renounce their membership of another Christian Church, unless required to by that other Church.

or her commitments and to take a full part in the worship and mission of both Churches, may seek to be appointed a Local Preacher – thus serving the two Churches in both roles in parallel.

Methodist Standing Orders (SO565B) state, ‘It is the general policy that the interests of local preaching are best served if all those who wish to become local preachers follow a programme prescribed or validated by the Methodist Council.’

## **Local Preachers**

### ***Offering their gifts to the Church of England***

Individual Local Preachers are free, according to the disciplines of both Churches, to make themselves available or be invited to perform any of their usual functions in the context of Church of England worship.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Except in more rural areas where the need might be greater, Local Preachers should not be surprised if they are only very rarely invited to conduct the entire service in a parish church. In this respect, Readers would be in an identical position. An invitation ‘to preach’ in the Church of England means simply an invitation to preach the sermon, while someone else takes responsibility for leading the rest of the service.

## THREE WAYS IN FOR LOCAL PREACHERS

### *a) Invitations from individual parishes*

Occasional invitations must come from the incumbent of the parish. Invitations to perform these functions on a regular basis need the prior approval of the Parochial Church Council and the bishop.

A number of bishops, in the context of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, are indicating their approval in general and in advance, so that the approval becomes applicable whenever the incumbent and PCC agree to make the invitation.

All these arrangements are expressly permissible within the working of the Ecumenical Relations Measure 1988 and are covered by Canon B43.

### *b) More general invitations*

Local Preachers who are willing to make themselves more generally available across a whole diocese, and who are actively involved in the worshipping life of a Church of England parish – as indicated by placing their names on the Church Electoral Roll, may also be granted ‘permission to preach’ by the bishop.

This provision has long been available under Canon B18.2, but the terms of its use are not clearly defined. Only in a few dioceses does it appear to have been used in relation to Methodist Local Preachers.

*At the request of his local Anglican parish church, a Methodist Local Preacher of many years' standing in East Yorkshire recently received a formal letter from the Archbishop of York giving him permission to preach in Church of England churches in the diocese.*

*This individual story is just one of many signs of a growing friendship and collaboration between 'church' and 'chapel' in many rural communities in Yorkshire and elsewhere.*

*c) Becoming also a Reader*

Local Preachers who are able and willing to fulfil their commitments and to take a full part in the worship and mission of both Churches, may in many cases follow the normal procedures for seeking to be licensed as a Reader in the Church of England – thus serving the two Churches in both roles in parallel.

The Church of England authorities responsible for the person's training and accreditation are likely to take some account of the training he or she had already received as a Local Preacher, but each person's case will be considered individually.

A difficulty for some Methodist Local Preachers in following this route lies in the current canonical requirement that Readers must have been confirmed prior to admission. In this case 'confirmation' means 'confirmation by a bishop according to the discipline of the Church of England'. This obviously does not apply to those who have been confirmed in the Methodist Church. The question of the recognition of confirmation conferred in other churches is currently being discussed within the Church of England.

None of these arrangements raises any disciplinary issues within the Methodist Church, provided the Local Preacher continues to fulfil his or her obligations within the circuit.

*Across the country a number of individuals have already taken on this dual ministry as both Local Preachers and Readers. As with other examples highlighted on these pages, the possibility seems to make most sense to people in rural settings.*

## **Local Preachers and Readers**

### ***Shared resources and training***

Despite the significant differences between Readers and Local Preachers, more attention could perhaps be given to where the roles overlap and where shared support and resourcing would be beneficial to both groups.

The initial training of Local Preachers and Readers may, however, not be the best place to begin.

### **CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO TRAINING**

Initial training for Local Preachers currently follows a standard programme authorised for the whole Connexion by the Methodist Council. In 2007, Regional Training Partnerships at St John's College, York and Chester University had foundation level Degree Courses validated as alternatives to the Methodist Council's training specification for Local Preacher training. Such courses might facilitate the training of Readers and preachers from other Churches alongside Methodist Local Preachers.

Each Diocese in the Church of England is free to develop its own training scheme, although the quality is carefully moderated through the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council. This allows greater flexibility and local relevance – even though this has meant, at least in the past, that the scope of the training could vary quite considerably.

The two contrasting approaches to training – and the levels of accountability attached to each – have so far limited the development of integrated programmes, but the Regional Training Partnership initiatives at York and Chester may be pointing to a way forward.

### **Ongoing Learning**

The continuing training and resourcing of Readers and Local Preachers *after* they have begun their ministries perhaps offers greater potential for mutual benefit. Greater co-ordination is inhibited only by relatively trivial practical considerations – mainly geography! However, underlying the trivia, the cultural perspectives cannot be ignored.

The natural ongoing learning environment for the Local Preacher is the Local Preachers' Meeting in the circuit. There the Local Preacher is part of a close-knit learning community alongside the ordained ministers where together they share responsibility for preaching and leading worship across the circuit. Regular participation in the Preachers' Meeting is an integral and obligatory part of the Local Preacher's role; the system would not work without it.

Most Readers, at least until recently, have been offered a much less intense experience of sharing in a common purpose. Although the importance of Area Readers' Meetings varies from



diocese to diocese, it seems they have only begun to grow in significance when Areas have become more closely related to deaneries. In these circumstances, questions can be asked when a Reader fails to attend. Where these developments have not happened, attending the Area Readers' Meeting can to be treated as very much an 'option.' Individual Readers can decide whether or not to attend largely on the basis of whether the programme of the meeting interests them.

In principle at least, it had been implicitly assumed that Readers would experience teamwork and sharing in a common purpose through their relationship with their Incumbent. On this basis it was expected that the ministry team in their parish or benefice would be their 'learning community'.

Perhaps as a result of these differences of practice, very little attention has yet been given to what could prove to be a very considerable common learning agenda. Where joint initiatives have been attempted, they have mostly taken the form of specially-arranged joint study days.

### **Singing the Lord's song in a strange land (!)**

*In one part of the country, where the Diocese and the District are almost completely co-terminous, Readers and Local Preachers recently enjoyed two creative day workshops exploring the cultural differences affecting their experience of leading worship and preaching in each other's Churches.*

## **A possible scenario for shared learning**

The trend in most dioceses towards relating Readers more closely to their deaneries suggests a possible scenario provided four ingredients are in place:

1. The Readers' Area is the Deanery
2. Deanery Chapter meetings regularly include the Readers from the deanery
3. The Deanery and the Circuit are mostly co-terminous
4. The Deanery and the Circuit are prepared to make a commitment to work together

In these circumstances, the Local Preachers' meeting and the joint meeting of the Deanery Chapter and the Readers could develop a single common agenda that met the requirements of all concerned. Finding the common agenda is critical. Too often, when superficially similar groups meet from two different Christian traditions, they are surprised to find they have little to discuss.

## **Mutual Cherishing**

An unlikely area of mutual cherishing is the pastoral care that is offered to Readers by their Area Warden under the oversight of the bishop. There is nothing to prevent the Area Warden being a Methodist – and in a rural area, where Readers contribute a great deal to leading worship in a Methodist circuit, such a relationship can make a lot of sense.

It is not so easy to see how this arrangement could be reciprocated since, for Local Preachers, pastoral care is exercised

mutually, with oversight from the Superintendent Minister working with the Circuit Local Preachers' Secretary.

### **A Methodist Area Warden of Readers**

*In one rural area of the country, the Methodist Superintendent Minister, whose circuit almost exactly matches the local Readers' Area, has for some years been the popular and successful Warden of Readers.*

### ***An individual exchange of gifts***

One of the distinctive marks of a covenant relationship, as discernible from scripture, is the mutuality of a gracious giving and a grateful receiving – all for a purpose beyond the self-interest of the covenant partners.<sup>10</sup>

So when the roles of Local Preacher and Reader are often very different, what are the gifts that can be exchanged? What resources are released when the two ministries are shared?

**As individuals, Local Preachers and Readers bring gifts and talents, which both our Churches need to learn to accept with gratitude.**

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10 See chapter 2 of 'In the Spirit of the Covenant' – the 2005 interim report of the Joint Implementation Commission of the Anglican Methodist Covenant.

*The essential gifts that all Local Preachers and Readers will want to offer and share include*

- Knowledge of the Bible and a clear personal Christian faith
- Theological competence and the capacity to reflect
- Professional and practical skills and wisdom from daily life

*Other gifts may include*

- Communications skills, especially in preaching and leading worship – a priority amongst Local Preachers
- Teaching and pastoral skills, as well as skills in leadership in mission – which may form a particular vocation for many Readers

## ***Making a virtue out of the differences***

As Deaneries and Circuits face the challenge together of being partners in mission, the distinctive gifts of Local Preachers and Readers represent a resource for ministry and mission that cannot be ignored.

In any locality both Methodists and Anglicans will be called to share in God's mission alongside other Churches. Should both Local Preachers and Readers be asking what their gifts and training might enable them to offer to the whole family of Christ's disciples who are seeking to live out the Gospel in that place?

Readers especially might be able to stimulate lay collaboration in mission across all traditions – and they might find that, alongside Local Preachers, there are other potential partners in the Methodist Church (and other Churches) with roles in training and community development, mission and evangelism.

In turn Local Preachers might have a role in stimulating creative links between worship-leaders and evangelists, visual artists and musicians not just within the life of the Methodist Church, in order to develop new ways of enabling people to come into God's presence in worship.



## ***Further information:***

### **Readers**

The Central Readers' Council of the Church of England maintains its own web site (linked to the Church of England web site) [www.readers.cofe.anglican.org](http://www.readers.cofe.anglican.org)

It also publishes a quarterly magazine, 'The Reader' – which is available from the Central Readers' Council, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ – price £5 for four issues. Cheques payable to 'Central Readers' Council'.

### **Local Preachers**

The Local Preachers' Secretary for the Methodist Connexion is Joy Barrow, based at the Local Preachers Office, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR

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Support for Local Preachers is also given through the Leaders of Worship and Preachers' Trust (LWPT) [www.lwpt.org.uk](http://www.lwpt.org.uk)

The LWPT publishes 'Ichthus,' a quarterly magazine which includes regular reports from the Connexional Local Preachers Office.