



Who we are: Studying Diversity Among Methodist Deacons Using Free-text Responses

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1. Introduction

For contemporary organisations, whether secular or faith-based, the 'tick-box' approach to diversity monitoring is the default method for collecting demographic information. However, while undoubtedly helpful for statistical analysis, the limitations of this process are that the tick-box format struggles to respond to 'mixed' categories, to changes in collective understanding of identity, and to the sheer multiplicity and fluidity of identities within each human being. The time is ripe for organisations to find new ways of asking questions about diversity information gathering, and there is a role for faith communities in leading the way.

For churches and faith organisations with rich theologies of the value, dignity, and diversity of human life, the limitations of 'tick-boxes' are problematic. An approach to diversity monitoring that constricts answers about human identity to standard, pre-defined categories does not simply provide a limited understanding of people. It undermines those theological commitments in the public arena and contributes to a damaging dissonance between what is said in theory and what is done in practice. For Christian communities in particular, developing a different approach provides an opportunity for a greater understanding of identity dynamics and their implications for the life and witness of the Church.

The Susanna Wesley Foundation is responding to this challenge by exploring new approaches to collecting demographic information, to enable organisations to deepen their understanding of – and engagement with – the diverse identities of their members.

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2. The survey

In Spring 2017, the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO) took part in a research process to develop a preliminary profile of its members' diverse identities. This project was carried out by Christopher Stephens and Lia Shimada, who wrote this report. It was edited by Emma Pavey

In collaboration with Karen McBride and Richard Goldstraw, and with input from Nicola Price-Tebbutt, the Susanna Wesley Foundation prepared a bespoke survey for the MDO. The semi-structured questionnaire offered open (free-text) responses to a range of questions within various diversity and identity strands. Participants were invited by this provision to express their identities and their understanding of their 'diversity' in their own words. The following questions were asked:

- What is your age (or how would you describe your age?)
- How would you describe your disability status? Are you registered disabled?
- How would you describe your ethnic identity?
- How would you describe your national identity?
- How would you describe your relationship status?
- How would you describe your family arrangements?
- How would you describe your gender?
- How would you describe your sexual orientation?

- How would you describe your religious and/or spiritual affiliation?
- Diaconal Identity: Methodist Deacons are called to a ministry of 'witness through service'. To what extent – or not – does this define your identity?

This report is a summary of the full report, presenting some highlights that emerged and assessing the effectiveness of offering open questions over tick boxes.

3. Findings

3.1 What is your age (or how would you describe your age)?

Most participants chose to respond with a number, ranging from early-30s to mid-80s. Perhaps due to the wording of the question, only a handful of participants took the opportunity to offer longer, qualitative answers that flesh out the numbers. This question was the least used in terms of the free-text option.

3.2 How would you describe your disability status? Are you registered disabled?

In the survey, we provided the following note for clarification:

You do not need to be registered disabled to have a disability. The Equality Act of 2010 defines "disability" as "a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities".

Armed with this information, the majority of participants – although not a large majority – responded with a variation of "none" or "able-bodied". Some responses described age-related 'slowing down' concerns.

A greater number of participants provided descriptions of their disability status than the number who affirmed that they are officially registered. Thus, for this question, a free-text option beyond the yes/no of registered disability allowed respondents to elaborate in an informative way that would otherwise be hidden.

3.3 How would you describe your ethnic identity?

The vast majority of participants self-identified as "White". However, a much smaller number used that word alone. The remainder used "white" alongside a total of 17 other terms – thus, this form allowed the opportunity for expressing nuance.

"British" was also a popular identification, with over half of the participants choosing this, either on its own or in combination with other descriptors. Other responses named regions of England, suggesting that deacons are proud of their regional heritage and consider it part of their ethnicity.

A few people described their ethnic identity as "Christian", opening up some interesting questions about the relationship between religion, culture, and ethnic identity.

3.4 How would you describe your national identity?

"British" was the most popular designation and the majority of participants used the word on its own, but sometimes it appeared in combination. "English" came a distant second followed by "Wales/Welsh" and "Cornish".

Some fascinating themes emerged from the free-text responses to this question. Some wrote about where they were born, others about their parents' nationalities, and others about the passports they hold. Some participants chose to answer this question with regard to cultural affinity.

Along similar lines to the question about ethnic identity, several people wrote about regional affiliations. This question also revealed a spectrum with regard to patriotism, from "Patriotically British" to "an embarrassed Brit". Amongst the members of the Methodist Diaconal Order who responded to the survey, there was clearly a range of feeling and experience with regard to national identity expressed in the free text boxes.

3.5 How would you describe your relationship status?

When we asked about personal relationships, the vast majority of participants described themselves with some form of standardised category: married, in a civil partnership, single, divorced, widowed.

Approximately two thirds were married or in a civil partnership.

By allowing people to describe their situations in as much detail as they wished, the question aimed to allow for a variety of relationships amongst deacons. However, the vast majority (over 90%) gave simple answers of one to three words.

The opportunity to describe personal relationships did allow a number of participants to reflect on the importance of wider networks to their lives: friends, family, animals. This brings us to the next question.

3.6 How would you describe your family arrangements?

Definitions of family arrangements included itemising those living in the same home and listing family members living elsewhere. Family included nieces, nephews, children from previous marriages, grandchildren, absentee children, and dependent parents, as well as friends, neighbours, and even pets.

Some participants described their family arrangements in positive adjectives. Others described a sense of difficulty – most frequently, this related to caring responsibilities, either as a carer or requiring the support of others.

Close to 15% of participants expressed confusion as to what the question meant or did not reply – this is perhaps because this is not a question topic generally used on standardised forms.

3.7 How would you describe your gender?

The vast majority of participants described themselves as either male or female. However, just a few responses revealed a nuanced, non-binary, or non-typical understanding of gender and identity. These respondents demonstrate that Methodist deacons may identify outside of the dominant male/female categories and thus be restricted by binary tick box forms.

3.8 How would you describe your sexual orientation?

All but a very few respondents identified simply with the terms heterosexual/straight or gay/lesbian with the remainder who answered using the text

option to give more nuanced responses to describe themselves.

It's worth noting that while this is now a common question on monitoring forms, close to 7% chose not to answer this question, some stating their strong preference for privacy in this matter. In addition, several used a gender term (female) to describe their sexuality suggesting a lack of clarity on the distinction between sexuality and gender.

A small number of participants used words like "normal" or "uncomplicated" to describe their identities, presumably centring heterosexuality.

3.9 How would you describe your religious and/or spiritual affiliation?

Perhaps not surprisingly, over three quarters of participants used the term "Christian" somewhere in their response to this question, with half using the word "Methodist". However, over half of those who used these terms added more detail, making the free text box very useful. Several people commented on strands of contemplative practice that shape their identity, or on how they were raised and how this impacts their identity.

Respondents described their affiliation using nouns ("I am a ..."), verbs (e.g. worship, practice, serve, veer, express, locate), and adjectives (e.g. wide, broad, inclusive, curious, active, quiet). The words "Deacon" or "Diaconal" were only used in a very small number of responses.

3.10 Diaconal Identity: Methodist Deacons are called to a ministry of 'witness through service'. To what extent – or not – does this define your identity?

Following on from the previous question, we formulated this bespoke question in collaboration with representatives from the MDO office and the Methodist Faith & Order Committee. This is not a question that normally appears on diversity monitoring forms but it gave deacons an opportunity to reflect on their diaconal identity, and this question elicited the longest answers.

Most respondents indeed gave detailed answers to this question, and, broadly speaking, the vast majority of the deacons who responded affirmed that the statement does describe their identity.

Several pointed to a tension between 'being' and 'doing', arguing for better phrasing and wondering how the description fits with public worship. And finally, a small number of people responded that this statement does not describe their identity, being either insufficient or anachronistic.

Responses indicated that this area would benefit from further research by the Methodist Church and the Diaconate Order.

4. Discussion - Diversity, Community, and Theology in Practice

Organisational studies show that the positive effects of diversity amongst members are numerous (see reading list at the end of this report): stronger teams, more creativity, broader perspectives, improved problem-solving, and greater commitment from members.

For Christians, human life is a reflection of God's own image, and diversity is an intentional, and valuable, part of God's creation. From this perspective, finding a method for understanding, celebrating, and enhancing the diversity of the Church is a theological standpoint and a theological practice. Finding and using the right method for collecting and analyzing data is therefore the critical starting point.

The method and motivation for gathering information (data) on diversity is an important first step for any organization as part of a plan to develop organisational diversity. It is important for this to be done in as ethical, inclusive, and culturally sensitive a way as possible. In this project, we have illustrated how allowing free text responses rather than tick box diversity monitoring forms provides for more fine-grained descriptions, and allows participants to take ownership of how they define their own identities.

We have found that while respondents in many cases chose simple answers, perhaps due to a lifetime of completing tick box forms, a good number of other respondents benefited from the opportunity to describe their identities in a fuller way.

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5. Suggestions for further reading

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6. Authors

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