

Jenny is feeling uneasy. She has discovered in conversation that a number of people in the class are following the course with a view to becoming candidates for the ministry. She feels no such calling. All she wants is to become a local preacher. No-one has said anything to her but she cannot help but feel as if being a local preacher is only a half-way house on the road to ordination.

She asks.... **Why do some people clearly see local preaching as a means to ordination rather than an end in itself?**

Jenny, do I detect a note of protest or criticism in your question? If so, I have to say that I sympathise with how you feel. We local preachers need to stand up proudly and assert that our particular calling is valid in its own right and must never be seen as merely a point on the road to ordained ministry. As local preachers we are part of a tradition that goes back to the start of Methodism. Ever the pragmatist, Wesley recognised that God had gifted and could use individuals who had a desire to preach but who were not cut out, either by circumstances or gifting, for all the other demands of being a minister.

It has always been part of the genius of Methodism that it is able to provide outlets for lay ministry in preaching and testimony. In rural circuits especially, many services could simply not be covered were it not for the active participation of dedicated local preachers. Some preach regularly, some occasionally and all stand ready to step into the breach at short notice when required.

Thinking about local preachers has changed. It used to be that as long as someone could preach a reasonable sermon it was automatically assumed that they would make a good minister. Well intentioned people would sidle up to you after a service and, by way of a compliment, ask if you had ever thought of candidating. It was kindly meant but the reality is that there is so very much more to being a minister than preaching. Just because a local preacher, given a few weeks' notice, can produce a half decent message does not mean that they will be able to preach every single Sunday, pastor people with complex problems and needs, inspire and manage volunteers and plot strategically the way forward for a church.

Preaching of course is an important part of a minister's calling. That is why candidates for the ministry are expected to first of all be accredited local preachers. It would be just awful for people to have to sit Sunday by Sunday listening to someone who clearly had no gifting or feeling for preaching and no obvious love for the Word of God. Being a local preacher demonstrates that this is not the case. Then if they want to pursue ordination they have at least cleared the first hurdle on the way to becoming a minister. They have a proven track record of leading worship and sharing from scripture.

What you are noticing is that sometimes it doesn't quite happen like that. Sometimes God's call comes to someone who has never preached before. They have to start at the very beginning. They do the study to become a local preacher but all the time they have their sights on something more. For them local preaching is (as you say) a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This does not

diminish local preaching. Their progress through Faith and Worship will lay a foundation upon which their later studies will build. We cannot legislate for how and when God will call someone into His service but it is they who are the exceptions and not you.

The important thing is that you don't end up feeling like a second class citizen in the group or like someone who has not had the courage to go the whole way in obeying God's call. As a local preacher you have the luxury of being able to focus simply on preaching and leading worship. And it is a luxury - so many of our ministers gladly continue to preach after retirement whereas they are only too happy to lay down the other duties and demands of leadership. For them it's getting back to their first love. They began as local preachers and they find themselves back in the position where they can once again give priority time to study, preparation and proclamation.

At the end of the day it's all about God's call. Our task is to be obedient and His is to guide and direct our path. Right now, your call is to become a local preacher and you are faithfully and successfully moving in that direction helped, I know, by your minister and by your local tutor. They are playing their part by encouraging you and giving you opportunities to develop. I've no doubt that before long you will prove to be a great blessing to your home church and circuit.

Mind you, Jenny, I feel that I must finish with a word of caution. Sometimes God has a way of surprising us. It's not beyond the bounds of possibility that He may one day call you into the Methodist ministry. That is for the future. Your task is to be obedient to what He asks of you now. Elizabeth Elliott puts it well as she wisely asks *"Does it make sense to pray for guidance about the future if we are not obeying in the thing that lies before us today? How many momentous events in Scripture depended on one person's seemingly small act of obedience! Rest assured: Do what God tells you to do now, and, depend upon it, you will be shown what to do next."*

For now, rejoice in the honour and privilege of being "one of Mr Wesley's preachers".