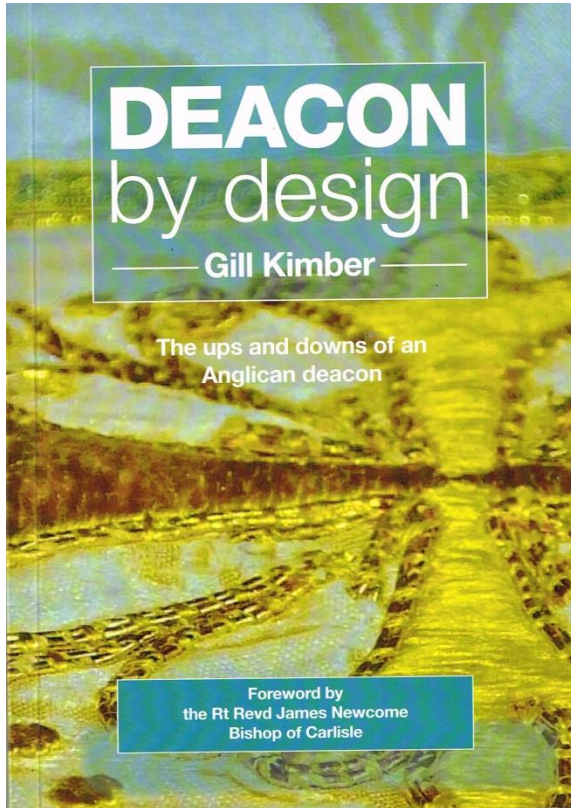


**Gill Kimber. *Deacon by design: The up and downs of an Anglican deacon.***  
 Self-published through Verité CM Limited, Worthing, UK, 2019



The title of this book says it all: *deacon by design*. Gill Kimber was not, is not, a deacon because she had to be to qualify for the priesthood – she chose the diaconate as a permanent vocation, something still all too rare in the Church of England. Was it smooth sailing? The secondary title gives the answer! Ordained in 1991, Ms. Kimber was in the first wave of women deacons in the C of E. Most of them went on the priesthood when it was opened to women in 1994. Gill Kimber deliberately did not.

*Deacon by design* is a very personal story. Deacon Kimber, daughter and granddaughter of priests from the Catholic tradition of the Church of England, had no intention of marrying a clergyman or being one herself. Her husband was a Baptist and they both served as lay missionaries in Nigeria for ten years. Returning to England in 1985 with four children, they found their lives completely up-ended. Gill’s husband Geoff followed a call to ministry in the Church of

England and persevered through seminary to ordination as a priest. Then it was Gill’s turn to experience a call – to the diaconate. Her chapter titles are revealing: “Fighting God”; “God’s Mysterious Ways”; “Now It’s Your Turn”; “A Bumpy Ride”; “A Deacon At Last.”

Discernment, acceptance for ordination, theological college, the parish “curacy” required for C of E clergy, all presented challenges for a mother of four. But Gill Kimber faced even more obstacles. Women’s ordained ministry was still a novelty in the 1980s and opposed in particular by two parties in the Church of England: at one end, conservative Anglo-Catholics who shared with Roman Catholics and Orthodox the belief that only men could be ordained; at the other end, conservative evangelicals with a “powerful conviction that the Bible teaches that women should not be in any kind of spiritual leadership” (63). After Ms. Kimber was ordained deacon in 1991, a hostile incumbent from the latter school made her parish curacy painful. And the diaconate was widely regarded as a dubious form of ministry, essentially a pro forma training year for the priesthood. Attending one of the first ordinations of women priests in 1994, Deacon Kimber experienced patronizing comments, familiar to many deacons then and since, that she too would eventually graduate into the “higher order” of ministry.

Deacon Kimber shared in her husband’s parish ministry and worked at Coventry Cathedral. Then in 2002 they both felt a call to serve abroad, for three years in a health and education project in Sibiu, Romania. This was followed by a two-year stint teaching at a theological school in Alba Iulia at the invitation of the Romanian Orthodox archbishop, together with involvement in an evangelical Orthodox group. Throughout the five years in Romania, although her husband was acknowledged and welcomed as an Anglican priest, Gill Kimber could not identify herself as a deacon, given Orthodox sensitivities to women’s ordination – hence the chapter title “Undercover Deacon” ! The couple returned to England in 2007, ministering in an inner-city parish in Birmingham until retirement to rural Devon in 2012.

Fortunately, the story does not end there. Finding herself in the deacon-friendly diocese of Exeter, Gill Kimber made contact with the local church authorities and was soon asked to take over as warden of the diocesan College of Deacons. She also found that a great supporter of the diaconate, Dr. Paul Avis, was canon theologian at Exeter Cathedral and visiting professor of theology at the University of Exeter. She promptly recruited him to speak at the annual diocesan deacons’ day. Deacon Kimber had been actively involved in the Diaconal Association of the Church of England (DACE), formed in 1988, and shared in its great disappointment when the report *For such a time of this* on diaconal ministry was rejected in 2001 by the House of Laity in the Church of England’s General Synod under pressure from lay readers. It was, says Ms. Kimber, “a serious blow, one from which DACE never really recovered” (68). The organization disbanded in 2017.

Gill Kimber then took active steps to revive diaconal dialogue through a deacons’ network, a website and a blog: <https://deaconstories.wordpress.com> She found a strong advocate in Bishop James Newcome of Carlisle, who contributed the Foreword to *Deacon by design*. In 2018, her group organized a major conference on the diaconate in Birmingham, with Paul Avis as a keynote speaker. By 2020, the bishops and dioceses of Chichester, Portsmouth, Carlisle, Exeter, London, Plymouth, York, and St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich had expressed support for the diaconate and a number of diaconal ordinations had taken place, including seventeen lay readers ordained by the Archbishop of York. Although there are still fewer than 200 distinctive deacons in the Church of England, the future looks brighter than it has for a generation.

Deacon Kimber concludes the book with a series of recommendations. End prejudice and discrimination against the diaconate. Clarify the distinctiveness of each ministry – “there is no need for [lay] readers to see deacons as rivals.” Establish a national policy on the diaconate. Create “relevant vocational discernment and training” (140). Find suitable posts for deacons, notably in team ministries. Will the day will come when “deacons will at last be able to take their rightful place, affirmed, respected and deployed as the third order of ministry within the Church of England?” (139). “My prayer,” she says, “is that this hope, shimmering on the horizon at present, will be a real oasis at last and not yet another mirage” (142). If the vocational diaconate finally turns out not be a “mirage” in the C of E, it will be largely due to the dedication and leadership of deacons like Gill Kimber.

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## ***The Vocational Diaconate: Book Review and Discussion***

by ***Deacon Canon D. Michael Jackson***

*Diocese of Qu'Appelle, Anglican Church of Canada*

The ministerial order of deacons is the subject of discussion and debate, conferences and research, development and experimentation in a number of Christian churches – among them Roman Catholic and Eastern, Anglican/Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist. Diaconal ministry in these traditions was assessed by the contributors to a book I edited for Sacristy Press in Durham, UK, in 2019, ***The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice***. Continued interest in the diaconate is evidenced by some other recent publications.



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