

The Diaconate: Seeking an Ecumenical Consensus

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The welcome invitation to contribute to this DOTAC seminar series came partly, I think, because I am the longest-serving deacon in the Anglican Church of Canada – although, I hasten to add, not the oldest, at least not yet! (If you hang in there long enough, you are deemed to have acquired enough wisdom to qualify for a DOTAC seminar, and even to get an honorary DD...)

But the main reason, I suspect, is my modest contribution to the literature on deacons in editing *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice*, published by Sacristy Press in the UK in 2019. This book was an outcome of an international Anglican-Roman Catholic-Ukrainian Catholic conference on the diaconate I coordinated in Regina in 2018. This in turn happened under the impetus of an ecumenical Covenant signed between the Anglican Diocese of Qu'Appelle and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina in 2011.

Given the three churches sponsoring the conference and the book, you will understand that I am approaching the topic of *diakonia* from a different perspective than the previous speakers in this series. Whereas they very ably represented the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, my focus is on the churches with the historic episcopate: Roman Catholic, Eastern Rites, and Anglican or Episcopal. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other Eastern Rites represent by far the largest number of the world's Christians. Without them, any discussion of the diaconate and *diakonia* can only be partial and incomplete. That said, those churches also need to be more aware of the others. So I'm glad I persuaded David Clark to contribute a chapter to our book on the diaconate in the British Methodist Church and Anne Keffer and Louise Williams to do the same on "Diaconates [plural] – the Lutheran Experience."

I see the ecumenical scene as a continuum, a range of emphases. At one end of the spectrum is the deacon as a liturgical functionary; at the other end, the deacon as an ecclesiastical social worker. The Eastern Rites would be at the liturgical end of the spectrum, followed by Roman Catholics; the Reformed Churches would be at the social work end, followed by Lutherans. As usual, Anglicans and Episcopalians would be somewhere in the middle! I acknowledge that this is very much an over-simplification. Furthermore, the diaconate is undergoing a substantial process of change, where the two ends of the spectrum are moving towards each other. I do believe we are arriving at an ecumenical consensus, starting with the premise that the diaconate and *diakonia* are now recognized by most churches, episcopal and non-episcopal, as an integral part of their ecclesiology.

I would like to explore three areas where this search for consensus is still a work in progress:

- 1) the understanding of *diakonia* and the diaconate;
- 2) the place of women in the diaconate; and
- 3) the issue of sequential ordination.

Understanding of *Diakonia* and the Diaconate

Acts 6: 1-6 recounts, according to most translations, how the disciples responded to complaints from the Hellenists that “their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.” The community appointed “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to handle this task, freeing the disciples to devote themselves “to prayer and to serving the word.” The apostles prayed over and laid hands on the Seven. There is a widespread assumption that they were the first deacons.

But most scholars agree that the accounts of the ministry of Stephen and Philip in *Acts* and the commissioning of the Seven do *not* refer to a distinct order of deacons. The passage in *Acts* may well refer to the apostolic ministry of word and Eucharist, not literally waiting on table. The notion that the Seven were deacons began with Irenaeus (c. 185), who retrospectively identified Stephen as the first deacon. This misinterpretation of *Acts* 6 has had major repercussions throughout the centuries. Which brings us to *diakonia*.

The biblical Greek word *diakonia* is usually translated as “service,” with connotations of humble assistance to others. However, the New Testament scholar John Collins has challenged this interpretation. *Diakonia*, he points out, had a much broader sense than “service” in New Testament Greek, also including “ministry,” “message,” “agency” or “attendant.” Similarly, the office of deacon, from the Greek word *diakonos*, has often been interpreted – thanks to *Acts* 6 – as a servant focusing on charitable work, whereas it originally had wider meanings of minister, agent, messenger, ambassador, envoy and representative. And these were what deacons did in the early Church.

When the Lutheran Churches in 19th century Germany revived the diaconate through the ministry of deaconesses, they evidently did so with the humble service connotation of *diakonia* as their guiding principle. In so doing, Lutheranism gave a major impetus to the renewal of the diaconate and especially its dimension of service to others. But what about the other end of the spectrum?

Historically, the Orthodox and other Eastern Rites emphasized the liturgical role of the deacon – some would say almost exclusively. By the Middle Ages the Latin or Roman rite had relegated the diaconate to a stepping stone to the presbyterate, which effectively marginalized the order of deacons for a thousand years. It was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Roman Catholic Church revived the order of deacons; you could say that this started the move towards

an ecumenical consensus, since the Anglican Communion and other churches were very much influenced by Vatican II in looking anew at the order of deacons.

How is a consensus emerging from these differing perspectives? First of all, the churches at the liturgical end of the spectrum are rediscovering the deacon's prophetic ministry of justice. The Lutheran and Reformed model is having a positive influence on these churches.

Second, the churches near the other end of the continuum have been moving towards the ecclesiological, sacramental and liturgical traditions of the historic episcopal churches. More and more they are recognizing the diaconate as an *ordained* ministry rather than a commissioned one. The United Methodist Church decided in 1996 that its deacons should be ordained. In some of the national Lutheran Churches, deacons are ordained; in others, they are not. Significantly, in 2019 both the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada agreed that deacons would be ordained to their ministry. These churches are also recognizing that the deacon's ministry of charity is rooted in the worship of the ecclesial community. So I do see our Churches reaching a consensus, well summarized by American Roman Catholic deacon William Ditewig: "Deacons serve in a balanced and integrated threefold ministry of Word, Sacrament and Charity."

Women and the Diaconate

Looking at the gender composition of this seminar, you may wonder whether this is an issue. But if you think again of the numerical importance of the Latin and Eastern Rite Churches in world Christianity, it is a very significant issue indeed. While there are a small number of women deacons in the Orthodox and Oriental Churches, the Roman Catholic Communion, including its Eastern rites, still does not ordain women to the diaconate.

Scholarship – and this includes Roman Catholic and Orthodox – has shown that there *were* women deacons in the early Church, especially in the East. There has been disagreement on whether they exercised the same ministry as male deacons (likely not, for cultural reasons) and whether they were episcopally ordained, or commissioned like sub-deacons (the majority view is they *were* ordained). The female diaconate largely disappeared by the Middle Ages apart from a few isolated pockets in the East, mainly due to increasing misogyny in the Church. The *coup de grâce* was the transitional diaconate – if a deacon was just an embryo priest and women could not be priests, *ergo* they could not be deacons either.

Contemporary scholars have tackled the issue of women deacons with great gusto! Orthodox theologian Kyriaki FitzGerald wrote a landmark study in 1999, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, with a supportive letter from none other than Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Dr. FitzGerald not only rehearsed the historical evidence for the female diaconate: she pointed out that it was never completely eliminated in Orthodoxy, has been recognized as valid by some of the current leadership, including Patriarch Bartholomew, and is

now being revived in several national Orthodox Churches. This is not without controversy, mainly for cultural reasons, and so far is very limited in scope. Orthodoxy moves very slowly. But there is hope on the horizon!

The Roman Catholic situation is more complex. The majority of scholars in that Church agree that in the early Church women were indeed ordained deacons and that they can and should be again. Leading the charge is Phyllis Zagano, a theologian at Hofstra University near New York, who served on the first commission appointed by Pope Francis in 2016 to study the issue. But there is considerable opposition to ordaining women deacons in the Roman Catholic Church.

One argument is that women cannot serve in the person of Christ the servant, since only men can be icons of Christ. Phyllis Zagano demolishes this by pointing out that through baptism *all* persons image Christ. The other argument is the old chestnut of the transitional diaconate: because deacons are priests in waiting and women cannot be priests, they cannot be deacons either. Underlying this is the fear that women deacons would be the thin edge of the wedge for women priests. But I believe the main reason for the resistance to female deacons is cultural: a history of deep-rooted misogyny in the Church – precisely the opinion of Phyllis Zagano.

This brings me to the final question: sequential ordination.

The Issue of Sequential Ordination

The early Church practised “direct” ordination to all three orders of ministry: deacon, presbyter, and bishop. This started unravelling after the Council of Nicaea in 325, as “sequential” ordination gradually replaced it – to become a priest you first had to be ordained deacon; to be a bishop you had first to be ordained deacon, then priest. By the Middle Ages the diaconate was relegated to a brief, pro-forma interval on the way to sacerdotal ordination – an “inferior office,” to quote the title of a fascinating 2015 book by British historian Francis Young.

This was compounded by the subsequent, retrospective interpretation of sequential ordination as *cumulative* ordination – the theory that each of the “superior” orders incorporates the others within it, so that a priest is also a deacon and a bishop is also a priest and a deacon. We are now far from a “full and equal order.” I was delighted to hear that the United Methodist Church has abolished the transitional diaconate – that’s exactly what I’m calling for too! The Lutheran Churches do not have a transitional diaconate. So our Methodist and Lutheran participants may say, “what’s the big deal?” Well, think again of the numerical importance of the historic episcopal Churches.

Sequential and cumulative ordination are most strongly defended in the Vatican and, curiously... in the Church of England. The justification for sequential ordination is that priests have to spend some time in the diaconate to learn *diakonia*. I don’t buy this argument. For one thing, you’re

not going to magically acquire *diakonia* by being a deacon for a year. For another, *all Christians are called to diakonia through their baptism*. Deacons exemplify and focus on this particular dimension of the baptized community.

The “cumulative” argument is that the diaconate is an integral part of the other two orders. Even Church of England theologian Paul Avis, who is very pro-deacon, supports this: “Any further ordination can only be built on the foundation of the diaconate,” he says. His case is based on the “new hermeneutic of *diakonia* as a divine commission [...] of the *tria munera* – the three-fold diaconal ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care.”

In my opinion, these practices have two negative effects: 1) they marginalize the diaconate as an order with its own integrity; and 2) the theory of cumulative ordination is used to block the ordination of women deacons in the Roman Catholic Communion. But there may be a way out of this: the Roman Catholic view that, whereas priests and bishops receive *sacerdotal* ordination, deacons are ordained to *ministry*. Phyllis Zagano maintains that diaconal ordination does not imply priestly ordination – they are totally different – so the Church can and should revive female deacons now, just as it revived the permanent diaconate in the 1960s.

I believe that we can move forward to a consensus. If, due to historical tradition and ecclesiastical inertia, we have to continue *sequential* ordination (and believe me, I’d rather not!), then let’s at least drop its *cumulative* interpretation. When transitional deacons are ordained priests, they leave the order of deacons, although of course they maintain their baptismal *diakonia*. Then we can focus on the “full and equal” order of deacons – which includes “full and equal” participation for half of the Christian population: women.

Suggested Reading

Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*. London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003.

John Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today*. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2009.

John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making connections between old and new*. Leomister, UK: Gracewing, and Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 2002.

William T. Ditewig, *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church*. New York: Paulist Press, 2007.

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.

D. Michael Jackson, ed., *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice*. Durham, UK: Sacristy Press, 2019.

Francis Young, *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England*. Cambridge,

UK: James Clarke & Co., 2015.

Phyllis **Zagano**, *Women: Icons of Christ*. New York: Paulist Press, 2020.