

A diaconal church and order of mission

The shape of things to come

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Summary of paper

This paper is prompted by the fact that the world is facing a unique set of global challenges. It argues that if we do not get our act together, humankind may eventually self-destruct.

However, the Christian story, and those acting in response to it down the ages, have left the world with a rich legacy that offers us the chance to survive and flourish. It is a legacy personified by the life of Christ and manifest in the gifts of the kingdom community - life, liberation, love and learning. Such a legacy could make possible the coming into being of one world as a global community of communities.

This legacy has been entrusted to Christians to treasure and communicate. Yet, at this critical moment in history, the church in the West finds itself, on the one hand, pre-occupied with survival and, on the other, embodying a privatized and closed understanding of its faith.

The paper argues that for the church to enable humanity to grasp the good news of the gospel and claim the gifts of the kingdom community, it must become a diaconal or servant church. This means becoming a servant both of the kingdom community and of humankind.

A diaconal church also requires new forms of servant leadership. The task of such leadership is to bring the legacy of Christian faith into the mainstream of human affairs and equip the people of God to enable social collectives, from the local to the global, to manifest the gifts of the kingdom community. Key to this undertaking is the creation of a diaconal order of mission.

The paper explains why this should be a diaconal order. It identifies a number of things currently preventing such an order coming into being and how they might be addressed. It argues that for such an order to become a microcosm of the kingdom community and to be empowered for its mission task it should take on the form a religious order.

The paper contends that for a diaconal order of mission to come into being, an essential requirement is that the diaconate as it currently exists is liberated from anachronistic roles and responsibilities and able to take its place as 'a full and equal order'¹ alongside presbyters. It is suggested that within a diaconal church presbyteral ministry could be renewed by becoming an order of continuity.

¹ A phrase first used by J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*.

The Christian legacy

Our world is in a mess! And it is a problem of our own making. There is no need here to do more than mention the litany of potentially self-destructive crises that now encompass the globe. From the destructive consequences of climate change to the extinction of a myriad living species, from weapons of mass destruction to a worldwide web that facilitates false news and lead to the debasement of human values, from the tenacity of poverty and starvation to the proliferation of civil war and violence - such challenges have placed an immense question mark over our future as a human race.

However, making confusion worse confounded, we have failed to mature as a human race and to learn that unless we work together there is no hope of successfully addressing those crises which now threaten our existence. As COVID-19 is making crystal clear, unless we build a world that becomes a global community of communities working together to face the challenges ahead, then humankind could all too soon become a passing phenomenon in the history of evolution.

On the other hand, we live in a world which remains founded on a rich legacy of Christian faith. As Tom Holland has argued with great eloquence², there would be no hope of creating one world if the message of Christianity had not permeated every aspect of western civilization and beyond. This has enabled us to gain a vision, however blurred, of what ‘God’s kingdom on earth’ might look like. It is a vision of a kingdom community which embraces humankind as a whole without destroying the identity and dignity of the part, be that individual or collective.

The fact that we are able to challenge those things that would dehumanize any of our fellow human beings and treasure the planet as a thing of beauty and beneficence are virtues that derive from the life, teaching and passion of Christ and the sharing of the good news of ‘the kingdom come’ down the ages. However much that story has been exploited to justify human greed and cruelty, by powers secular *and* sacred, its deepest meaning has continued to permeate and enrich countless generations. It is the only story which offers ‘faith, hope and love... (which) abide’³ to a world in crisis.

Church and kingdom

Despite its many failures, the church still retains ‘the keys of the kingdom’.⁴ However, the church is not the kingdom. It is the *servant* of the kingdom, and of the Trinity which brought it into being. The church has continued over two millennia to witness to this kingdom and its gifts of life, liberation, love and learning⁵ as manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It continues today to bear witness to that kingdom as the archetype community, a model of wholeness offered to a fragmented and struggling world.

The gifts of the kingdom community go hand-in-hand with responsibilities. For example, the gift of life lays upon humankind the obligation to exercise proper stewardship of the planet⁶; the gift of liberation requires us to pursue justice, exercise forgiveness and strive for reconciliation; the gift of love compels us to accept that the poor, the weak, the

² Tom Holland (2019) *Dominion - the Making of the Western Mind*

³ 1 Cor. 13:13

⁴ Mt. 16: 18-19

⁵ I first referred to these gifts in *Breaking the Mould of Christendom*, pp. 21-27 and 37-40.

⁶ For an inspiring description of such stewardship see Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*.

marginalized and the oppressed have as much dignity and worth in the sight of God as every other human being; and the gift of learning requires us to commit ourselves to the quest for truth and integrity.

At the same time, the lordship of the Trinity, and its Great Commandment - that we should love God and our neighbor - challenges every other form of authority, secular and sacred, above all any power which attempts to usurp the divine legitimation of the Christian way of life and of what it means to be human.

The importance of kingdom and Trinity remind us that there is urgent need for the church to give much more attention to the meaning of a kingdom theology for our world today.

From a compromised to a diaconal church

Because Christians have such a vital message for our time, it is a tragedy that we so frequently collude with a world which thinks it can go it alone, using up the capital of its Christian inheritance without serious consequences. It is dispiriting that we have become captive to a naïve optimism which relies on human nature and the supposedly inherent virtues of humanity to see us through the uniquely global crises which lie ahead. Have we, along with those who reject the West's Christian legacy, forgotten that half a century ago human nature gave impetus to the rise of Fascism and the horrors of the holocaust, to Stalinism and the slaughter of millions his people, and to Maoism and the horrendous cultural revolution?

A further calamity is that just when the church is needed to reclaim and proclaim the universal and inclusive message of the kingdom community, millions of Christians have retreated into a privatized and closed form of faith which means salvation for them but for nobody else. By so doing, they have contracted out of challenging the powers that now dehumanize and divide humanity, threatening global fragmentation and the destruction of the planet.

At the same time, the church in the West still remains captive to an anachronistic Christendom way of being. This assumes that it will continue to be able influence the life of society as an 'established' religion, that a hierarchical and clerical doctrine of leadership will continue to carry weight, and that its traditional symbols and rituals will retain their potency with dwindling communities of faith to sustain them. This critical situation requires much more honest recognition of, and far deeper debate about the nature and mission of the church to come than appears evident at the moment.

It is crucial to recognize that we are failing the divine imperative to communicate that the coming of the kingdom community promises salvation for the *whole* of humankind.⁷ It is the promise of a world which can be one in Christ because transformed by the gifts of life, liberation, love and learning. It promises humankind a *universal* sense of solidarity. At the same time, it affirms human identities of a more circumscribed kind, be they of gender, ethnicity, race or nationhood, provided we recognize that we are ultimately one people because God is a God of love, and to love God is to love our neighbor.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann sets out a powerful case for the centrality of the cross for our time in *The Crucified God* as has Tom Holland, from an agnostic vantage point, in *Dominion*.

If the church is to reclaim and proclaim the good news of the gospel and the gifts of the kingdom for the salvation of humankind, it must reclaim its true calling as a ‘diaconal’ or servant church. That means striving to reclaim its calling as the servant of the kingdom community, and thus of humankind, by working to enable every group, association, institution and nation to manifest the gifts of that community. It entails working with others to build communities, from the local to the global, transformed by the gifts of the kingdom community. A servant church pursues its mission through the ‘weakness’ of ‘the crucified God’⁸ and not the power of human domination.

Servant leadership

A diaconal church is synonymous with servant leadership. The calling of the latter is to make the vision of the kingdom community a reality. It is the contention of this paper that such a form of servant leadership has, embodied in the diaconate, been ready and waiting in the wings since the days of the early church.

The problem has been that as the church became politicized, it began to clone Roman forms of civil authority, integrating these into an hierarchical institution with the diaconate ever more marginalized.⁹ It was this institution which, in due course, came to exercise hegemonic domination over the western world. Nor did the Reformation do more than shift the locus of domination, leaving the church as a cohort of rival denominations vying with each other for influence over an increasingly disillusioned world. In this context, it remains a miracle that the Christian narrative of gospel and kingdom carried on being recounted and acted upon, and that, over the centuries, it has permeated the entire life of western civilization and beyond.¹⁰ That legacy is a tribute to the uniqueness and tenacity of the Christian narrative and the dedication and discernment of many faithful servants of Christ over the years.

It is the contention of this paper that to bring this legacy, with its potential to create a global community of communities and a new world order to bear on the crises humankind now faces, requires a diaconal church to commission a diaconal order of mission as exemplifying servant leadership and a means of proclaiming the great news of the kingdom.

A diaconal order of mission

The creation of such a diaconal order of mission would make it clear that the lordship of the Trinity and the primacy of the Great Commandment takes precedence over all forms of hegemonic ecclesiastical authority. The calling of that order would be to encourage human collectives to become microcosm of the kingdom community and engaged in such tasks as the preservation of the planet (the gift of life); the affirmation of the vulnerable and

⁸ Möltmann, *ibid.*

⁹ William Ditewig, a leading Roman Catholic deacon in the United States, states, in *The Emerging Diaconate*, that from the fifth century onwards the diaconate, hitherto a leadership calling of considerable importance in the early church, steadily declined (p. 75). A key reason for this was ‘the development of the idea of the *cursus honorum*’ within the church of the Constantinian era. The *cursus honorum* was imported from the Roman civil administration and indicated a succession of grades through which one progressed from the lower to the higher. Thus the practice of ‘rising through the ranks’, in the form of sequential ordination, began increasingly to shape the ordained leadership of Christendom from that era onwards.

¹⁰ As Holland, *op.cit.*, argues with great acumen and persuasiveness.

marginalized (the gift of love); the exercise of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation (the gift of liberation); and the quest for truth which is then spoken to power (the gift of learning).¹¹ The creation of such an order would enable a diaconal church to bear witness to the fact that the future of humanity depends on the good news of the kingdom being heeded and acted upon.

Why should this order of mission be a *diaconal* order?

In the first place, because the diaconate is already there. Though often hidden or neglected, it has remained an established order of ministry since the days of the early church. The diaconate, in one form or another, is still embedded in the life and work of the majority of denominations. Nor is there any need to invent another form of ministry when the diaconate is in pole position to respond to the needs of a world in danger.

Secondly, since its inception the diaconate has epitomized what it means to be a servant church. One of its primary concerns, as servant leaders, has always been to identify with the powerless, vulnerable and marginalized. From the days of the early church, when the poor, sick and bereaved were its major concern, to the re-emergence of the diaconate in mid-nineteenth century Europe to serve those suffering because of the consequences of the industrial revolution and urbanization, the diaconate has borne witness to the contention of Christian faith that the weak, neglected or oppressed have worth and dignity in the sight of God. So significant was this identification with humanity in its weakness that, early on in the life of the church, Ignatius identified the deacon with ‘Christ the Servant’¹².

Thirdly, from the beginning, the diaconate was not only concerned with the marginalized. It fulfilled a leadership role of considerable importance in the early Christian community at a local¹³ and regional level. In the latter situation, the deacon often occupied a position as the representative of the bishop and was prominent in the church’s administrative, financial and legal affairs.¹⁴ In such cases, deacons inevitably became involved in and knowledgeable about the ways and concerns of the wider world.

Fourthly, the diaconate has always worked alongside and sought to equip the laity, the diaconal church’s key missionary resource, for its ministry in daily life. In the early church, the diaconate was deeply involved in educating Christian converts about the meaning of the faith. In the nineteenth century, its educational role extended to children, whether from Christian homes or not, as well as to adults.

¹¹ One noteworthy recognition of this calling is found in the ecumenical Windsor Declaration of 1997. This called for the vocation of a renewed diaconate to be:
‘Christ-focused, people-centred and lived out in a lifestyle both active and contemplative... We increasingly perceive our role to be pioneering and prophetic, responding to needs, proactive in opportunity through commitment to mission and pastoral care within and beyond the Church. Opening doors of opportunity, encouraging others to take risks, the contemporary diaconate acting in its capacity as an ‘‘agent of change’’, engages imaginatively and collaboratively with issues of justice, poverty, social and environmental concerns. We often find ourselves spanning boundaries, especially official ones of Church and society.’

¹² Ditewig, op.cit., p. 67

¹³ Romans 16: 1 and 1 Timothy 3

¹⁴ Ditewig, op. cit., pp. 62-71

Finally, the diaconate has always been an order of ministry well suited to adapt to the changing needs of society and world. Over the years it has fulfilled a wide diversity of responsibilities enabling the church to engage with far-reaching economic, social and cultural changes. It has also witnessed to this changing scene in its contribution to worship, symbolically standing on the threshold between church and world.

Creating a diaconal order of mission

That the diaconate is so well positioned to take on the responsibilities of a new order of mission does not mean that the church is ready for it to do so.¹⁵ A number of significant developments need to take place for such an order to come into being.

In the first place, the diaconate needs to be liberated from roles tied to certain periods of history. Foremost here is a presumption that the primary ministry of the diaconate must be ‘humble service’¹⁶. Such a ministry remains important. Nevertheless, the critical *kairos* moment humankind now faces requires that a diaconal church commissions the diaconate, always responsive to the spirit of the age, to take on the larger and even more demanding task of enabling human collectives of all kinds to manifest the gifts of the kingdom community; life, liberation, love and learning. This requires a new diaconal order of mission committed and equipped to enable the worlds of business and finance, education, health and welfare, law and order, and, of course, government, to manifest those gifts.

This new focus of responsibility does not mean that a new diaconal order must go it alone. Far from it. The only way in which the communal transformation of society and world is feasible is for the diaconate to (re)animate, (re)enable and (re)equip ‘the people of God in the world’, as the church’s primary resource for mission¹⁷, and to work alongside them. Until the mid-twentieth century many lay people were aware of and committed to living out their faith in public life. Since then, the church in the West has turned inwards and allowed the time and energy of its laity to be expended on its own sustainability. A diaconal order of mission would reverse this change of direction.

Because a diaconal order of mission would be dedicated to the building of the kingdom community in wider society, it would need new skills. One such is the confidence and ability to exercise the responsibilities of servant leadership. Unfortunately, centuries of being rejected as ‘a full and equal order’ has produced a diaconate whose members sometimes demonstrate an acceptance of, if not subservience to an entrenched male

¹⁵ Michael Jackson’s *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective* is a ground-breaking symposium which demonstrates the richness but extreme diversity of current expressions of diaconal ministry. Some of these would seem in a good position to move towards becoming an order of mission. Others are at present far removed from such a development.

A useful overview of the forms of and opinions concerning the diaconate contained in this symposium has been produced by David Clark and Maurice Staton (see Bibliography).

¹⁶ This assumption about the diaconal role in the early church and after has been authoritatively challenged by John Collins.

¹⁷ One encouraging development in the middle of the last century was the reaffirmation of the primacy of the laity in the mission of the church, as in the case of Vatican II, a development which has sadly succumbed to a tenacious clericalism in recent decades.

clericalism. At the same time, some deacons think that to assume a more prominent leadership role in church and world smacks of presumption, and even disloyalty to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Others fear that exercising such a role may impose on them responsibilities beyond their capacities and require skills which they do not possess. If, therefore, deacons are to assume a key leadership role in a diaconal church, their training needs to embrace an awareness of kingdom theology, the skills and qualities of servant leadership and the ability to equip the people of God for mission in public life.

It is important for the diaconate as an order of mission, at present often widely dispersed and often compelled to work as lone rangers, to have greater coherence and experience a stronger sense of solidarity.¹⁸ One way of this being achieved is for it to become a religious order. This would reflect but not be moulded by the form of religious orders in the past. Its members would be female and male, single and married and include those who were financially supported by the order and self-supported. Its primary purpose would be to model for church and world what it means to be a microcosm of the kingdom community in today's world.

A diaconal order of mission would carry greater credibility and significance if it were able to embrace and give coherence to the bewildering diversity of ministries - such as so-called 'mission enablers', 'pioneer ministries' and, even worse, 'mission champions' - which the church in the West is currently inventing to try to stem its decline. Such ministries frequently have vague or vast job descriptions, are unrelated to each other and, more important, to the ministry of the people of God in the world. It would give coherence to such ministries, and add experience and skills to a diaconal order of mission, if they were incorporated into the latter.

Finally, a new order of mission needs to be wholeheartedly affirmed by the church to come. This means the latter abandoning the hierarchical model of ordination which first became entrenched when the early church began to clone the approach to civil authority adopted by the Roman world. Out of this emerged the now anachronistic doctrine of ordination being 'cumulative'¹⁹ and, later, of a so-called 'transitional diaconate'²⁰. These and other constraining consequences of the past, such as the existence of a single gender diaconate in certain churches²¹, mean that liberating the diaconate to address the needs of today's world will not be easy. However, this in no way negates the imperative case for change.

¹⁸ One of the foremost examples today of a diaconal order as a religious order is the British Methodist Diaconal Order. For a description of this see Maurice Staton 'The Development of Diaconal Ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain', and David Clark's *The Gift of a Renewed Diaconate*. pp. 3-7, 69-79.

¹⁹ This assumes that the priest continues to embody the hallmarks of the deacon; and the bishop continues to embody the hallmarks of the deacon and the priest.

²⁰ There is increasing questioning of the validity of the 'transitional' diaconate from deacons and presbyters, including a growing number of Anglican bishops. See also articles by Susanne Epting and Alison Peden in Michael Jackson's *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*, pp. 35-52.

²¹ See articles by Gloria Jones and Brian Butcher in Michael Jackson's *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*, pp. 72-87.

Presbyteral ministry

The shape of presbyteral ministry within a diaconal church is not the subject of this paper. Suffice it to suggest that, in time, fulfilling a role complementary to that of a renewed diaconate, presbyteral ministry could itself be renewed and empowered by being reframed as an ‘order of continuity’²². This is because there still exists the vital task of ‘keeping the home fires of faith burning’ and, in particular, of enabling a diaconal church to worship, pray and learn in ways that inspire, equip and empower it to nurture and resource the people of God for their essential task, alongside a renewed diaconate, of building one world in Christ.

A diaconal imperative

I end this paper where I began by returning to the critical situation in which our world now finds itself and the rich legacy of Christian faith on which we as a human race need to draw if we are to survive and flourish. The nature of a kingdom theology, and the features and form of the diaconal church and the diaconal order of mission now required to make that Christian legacy a reality in today’s world, need informed and ongoing discussion. It is an urgent debate yet one which has hardly begun. However, of this I am convinced. The direction of travel which I outline in this paper is that in which the church worldwide must begin to take if it is to fulfil the purpose for which the Trinity brought it into being.

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²² For a detailed description of prebyteral ministry as an order of continuity see David Clark, *Building Kingdom Communities*, pp. 141-157.

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Issued following a consultation between the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the British Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. The consultation also included conversations with a United Reformed Church CRCW and a deacon in training in the Orthodox Church.