

Review of Diaconal Publications: 4

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In the previous issue (April 2017), we reviewed *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England*, by Cambridge historian Francis Young. Now we look at *Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed*, by American Episcopal deacon Susanne Watson Epting, published the same year (2015). Next time, we'll review two American Roman Catholic publications: Jay Cormier, *The Deacon's Ministry of the Word* (Liturgical Press, 2016) and James Keating (ed.), *The Character of the Deacon* (Paulist Press, 2017).

Susanne Watson Epting. *Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed* New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015

This book stands in sharp contrast with its British counterpart. The titles say it all: “The Diaconate Renewed” versus “Inferior Office?” Indeed, the two books reflect the wide divergence in approaches to the diaconate between the Episcopal Church in the USA and the Church of England: enthusiasm in the former, hesitancy and scepticism in the latter. This is reflected in the number of vocational deacons – a hundred or so in England, 3,000 in the United States.

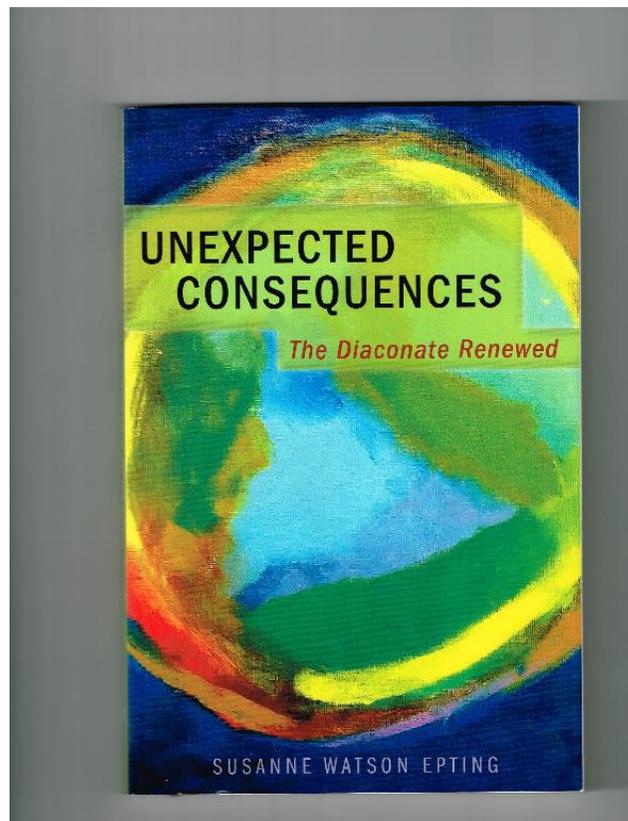
Susanne Watson Epting, a deacon since 1989 and a leading authority on the diaconate, was director of the Association of Episcopal Deacons for ten years. This book places her personal journey in the context of that of the Episcopal Church, rediscovering and reviving the order of deacons. *Unexpected Consequences* is therefore very different in style and content from the more academic *Inferior Office?* Deacon Epting's book is a chronicle of the diaconate in the Episcopal Church; as the author says in her preface, “It is the history of a movement, an Order in the contemporary church.” It tends to go rather heavy on the organizational side, referring to innumerable reports, conferences, working groups, general conventions and resolutions. Canadian Anglicans are somewhat bemused by what we see as the American Episcopal obsession with committees, canons and regulations for everything! But if non-American readers work around these passages, they will find invaluable information on, and interpretation of, the diaconate, with authentic case studies to back them up.

Deacon Epting takes as her starting point two key elements:

- The 1979 Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, which impressed her, as a new Episcopalian, with its theology of the diaconate and of the baptismal covenant.
- What we might call the “wave theory” of the development of the diaconate. This was the idea of the late Deacon Ormonde Plater, who had identified four “waves” of deacons in his 1991 book (revised 2004), *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*.

The 1979 American prayer book, Deacon Epting suggests, was ahead of its time: the church would take many years, indeed a generation or more, to grasp its implications: “a renewed ecclesiology where baptism was not only the initiation into the church, but the first call to ministry.” She situates the “prophetic and interpretive role of the deacon” clearly within the ministry of the *laos* and quotes the words of a “beloved mentor”: “It is no small thing that the renewal of the diaconate and the renewed understanding of baptism occurred at the same time.”

Deacon Epting does a reprise of Ormonde Plater’s four “waves” – and extends them. The first of these was the missionary or indigenous deacons who served in the United States from the 1840s for about a century. The second wave was that of the deaconesses, from 1885 to 1970 (Francis Young also referred to deaconess as precursors to ordained women in the Church of England). The third wave was male “perpetual deacons” from 1952 to 1970, ordained at a time of church growth “primarily to serve as pastoral and sacramental assistants.” Deacon Plater identified the fourth wave, starting in the 1970s, as a transitional time: deaconesses were made deacons (as happened later in the Church of England); some women became deacons in anticipation of eventual ordination to the priesthood (as would also happen in England); many others, male and female, and indeed the church as a whole, were seeking what a renewed vocational diaconate should be.



Susanne Watson Epting takes up where Ormonde Plater left off, although she cautions that the successive waves are “neither linear nor chronological” – they overlap and merge. She identifies a fifth wave, coinciding with and shaped by the implementation of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. This wave was one of “definition,” with two themes: total ministry of the church and servant ministry. It was the period of a six-year national Episcopal study of the

diaconate and a time when the North American Association for the Diaconate was expanding its footprint through conferences and publications. The Episcopal Church, like others in the 1980s, was wrestling with a number of issues over the diaconate: the place of the deacon in the community, the relationship of the deacon to the other orders of ordained ministry, the role of the deacon in supporting the ministry of all the baptized, the possibility of direct ordination and the end of the transitional diaconate, and a broader interpretation of servant ministry. On this latter point, the author quotes prominent Canadian deacon Maylanne Maybee, who called for deacons to be “agents of transformation.”

Transformation is in fact the characteristic of the sixth wave, which Deacon Epting calls that of “interpretation and prophetic voice.” This wave, dating from the late 1980s to the second decade of the 21st century, emphasizes the *leadership* role of the deacon and the gifts and training it requires. A prominent element is the direct involvement of the deacon in the “world” outside the church community. The author cites examples such as prison ministry, opposition to capital punishment (still practised in the United States), literacy, racism, and economic inequality, as areas where deacons serve an interpretive role.

Overlapping since about 2005 is a seventh wave. Deacon Epting sees it as one of “integration,” where the elements of previous waves come together, “engaging the *diakonia* of all believers, equipping the saints, interpreting the world, and advocating.” Because it is a work in progress, this seventh wave is not as clearly defined as its predecessors. And this portion of the book is not always easy to navigate due to a number of digressions, or rather diversions, into reports, committees, and formation curricula. However, some key messages emerge:

- The variety, adaptability and constant evolution of the diaconate.
- The renewal of diaconal discernment, education and training.
- The growing ecumenical dimension of the diaconate.
- The importance of the community of deacons for mutual sharing and learning and support.
- Practising *diakonia* within the baptismal covenant of all believers.
- Challenging the structures of the church and its relationship with the world.

What are the “unexpected consequences” of this diaconal ferment in the Episcopal Church? Here, Susanne Watson Epting sees dual outcomes of the theology of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. First is the “radical equality that comes with baptism” – the baptismal covenant that calls for Christians to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” Second is the “prophetic and interpretive role of the deacon” which has emerged from the restoration of the vocational diaconate – questioning the “things which get in the way of mission” of the church and “inviting her to recreate herself as a servant structure.”

Interpretation and prophetic voice have now become hallmarks of the diaconate in the Episcopal Church. For Deacon Epting, this involves “meeting people where they are and having a presence outside our church walls.” Deacons may be viewed as troublemakers, she says, but “it is important to recognize that while critical, the prophet energizes with hope.” Susanne Watson Epting has not just chronicled this hope-filled diaconal evolution: through her own leadership she has contributed to its dynamism. And to this, *Unexpected Consequences* bears witness.