

Keynote Speech: The Rev. Deacon Lori Mills-Curran

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Good evening, folks. I am so happy to be here. I have so much to say about deacon recruitment that I could hardly stop writing.

I always have a plethora of words, but I didn't have very many at the first A3D I ever attended. I had just gotten the job as Executive Director. Susanne Watson Epting did the presentation, the first public reveal of her theological paradigm, the Seven Waves of the Diaconate. In it she identified the varying theologies our church has had pertaining to the diaconate and traced their contours.

Susanne's insight became the backbone of her book Unexpected Consequences. Most of you are familiar with the waves: the early Black and Native American deacons, the deaconesses, the perpetual deacons of the 50's and 60's, the permanent servant deacons, the prophetic bishop's agent, the confused transitional era of deacons, and the deacon as resource and facilitator of the diakonia of all the baptized. Canada has its own version of these, and their Iona Report helped us so much to understand these identities.

Don't get hung up now on remembering *what* the waves are. My point here is not the features of the various theologies, but the significance of the fact that they exist. They do exist, and believe it or not, they all are still influential in our time. I know this primarily because I lived through four of them.

When the publisher asked me for a quote for Susanne's book jacket, I said that the book made me feel like the woman who met Jesus at the well: Susanne was telling me everything I had ever done. When I read the book, I really was dumbstruck. I had been a deacon 25 years. I had been ordained in one diocese, moved to a second, then a third, then a fourth. I had been a problem deacon, a lone ranger deacon, and a non-deacon in a diocese that that stopped ordaining them, and I never knew why. It took me 11 years to get letters dimissory in my current diocese. But Susanne helped me understand, for the first time, that I was not the problem. (I can be, but I wasn't this time.) The problem was that all four dioceses had a different idea of what a deacon's identity was.

None of these identities were *wrong*. Susanne's great contribution was to recognize that each identity could be regarded as a worthy model adapted to a particular context. But the significance of the waves for me was that each one that I experienced came with a full set of expectations that I had to incorporate into *my* diaconal life. In each diocese, indeed under each bishop, those expectations could actually be the opposite of what the proper deacon did in the former diocese or for the former bishop in the same diocese. That's how I got into trouble.

I almost gave up my diaconate *twice* because it was so damn hard to live it. I was ordained at 32 and miserable for the first 10 years, trying to navigate a vocation that stressed my family, because I, and they, had said yes to a diaconate that wasn't the one I now had.

In 2013, when I got this job as Executive Director, I was still confused about this. At that same A3D, the time came to discuss what AED should be, in the light of Susanne's new insights. AED had been founded in the fourth wave, to foster adoption of our order in every diocese. That job was pretty well complete. What was AED to be now?

I was sitting with two archdeacons. One was much younger, one was older. Both of them had been ordained a fairly short time. But they had very clear opinions. The older archdeacon had no doubt whatsoever about what AED should be; it was his professional organization. I flinched when he said that, because for me the idea of my diaconate being a profession was entirely remote. But the younger archdeacon agreed fully. *He* ran a family business, but he had no difficulty at all with AED being his professional organization. And he was a little peeved that we were taking so long to get going on it!

I was the foot dragger at the table. Both these rather newish deacons knew what they were and knew what they needed. *I* was still all hung up on what was appropriate for deacons to *do*, and what kinds of activities *AED* should do to fit in the box.

They were solid in their identity; I was still, 25 years in, scrambling for mine. They knew, it seemed to me, something that our former president Douglas Argue later gave me the words for. Douglas said: "A deacon is not something I *do*. A deacon is something I *am*."

What does all this have to do with current challenges to deacon recruitment? I believe my confusion as we talked that day is really the crux of the matter. I have come to believe that the biggest challenge to deacon recruitment is that we have not yet articulated with full clarity, as a church, that deacons can't just be what the current church decides they need them to be. We can't just be Jacks- and Jills-of-all-trades, defined by others as suitable workers, if we do these kinds of things, for a specific context in place and time. You can't build an identity for an order, offer people an invitation to discern a call to an order, if we can't tell them what it is. And what we are is a question of ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology is the theological discipline pertaining to the structuring of the church, the study of two important questions. First, how should the church modify its structure to fulfill God's will in its current context? And second, what are the appropriate constraints inherent in that ongoing restructuring task? By constraints I mean essential features of the church we have to be sure to provide for in *any* age, because we are not recognizably church if we give it up.

Susanne always says the deacons know who they are, even if nobody else does. But I don't think that's enough. I want to take us a step further. I think deacons are an essential feature of the church in any age. I think we do know who we are, and I want us to teach the church. If we can do that, I think recruitment will take care of itself.

Christians can structure the church however we want to. We can and we do. Every reformation deals with questions of ecclesiology, and every denominational split. This is not some esoteric concern; this is the work of the people of God, releasing and refilling ministerial identities with new meaning to get the work done. All orders have an identity that is contextualized for their era, yes. But even within that ongoing process of contextualization, there have to be articulable identities which have enough of a consistent core of meaning. In my view, our main challenge in locating the deacons the church needs is that deacons ourselves still grope to describe what we *are*, and often fall back on describing what we *do*.

It isn't sufficient to describe what we *do*. We have to articulate *why* we do it, and how it is related to an appealing core identity that potential candidates can get a handle on. I think we are really good at doing whatever the church wants us to do, leaning into our servant identity and our diaconal obedience to do whatever they ask.

But we are not very good at articulating a stable core of a diaconal identity, something that we will fight to retain when the next context impinges on the church to change its structure. This theological task of ours was important before. COVID has made it an emergency.

And there is danger in that. The various waves of diaconal theology each reflect their times. Some of these Waves are perfectly fitted to the church's articulated vision for their task in that context. But some of them might be a pretty sketchy vision for today. One of the areas I am exploring, hinted at in Ormonde Plater's books and further developed in Susanne's, is the increasing evidence that the first wave of the diaconate was used as a holding pen for black clerics who were prevented, on purpose, from accessing the priesthood. Deacons, and they were all transitional then, didn't have clerical votes. This feature of their diaconal identity kept the black deacons out of participation in the councils of the church. They were relegated to the status of perpetual novices. These deacons struggled to attain the priesthood because that was really what they were called to be. Much of story of their struggle has been lost in the press of affairs. There is a General Convention resolution filed, calling for a correction of an entry in Lesser Feasts and Fasts pertaining to an illustrious 19th Black deacon, Peter Cassey. He was rejected for priestly orders in three successive dioceses. He was rector of three parishes and a national leader. And somehow, somehow, he just happened to make it into Lesser Feasts and Fasts as a priest.

What does Peter Cassey's struggle have to do with diaconal recruitment today? All of us have heard that deacons didn't always vote in conventions, some of us have lived with it. Some few of us might live in peace with theological explanations which buttress the idea. I know who deacons hold that view in good faith.

But even though there might be views about diaconal voting today that we can accept without a fistfight, is it really completely unrelated to the fact that one wave's contours of identity was such a perfect tool for racism? Is it really irrelevant, when a deacon is deprived of his vote after changing dioceses, that he is grieved when he learns that whatever happened in his old diocese, this bishop does not allow deacons to vote?

This may seem like a ridiculous stretch. No, we are certain; that was wrong that those Black voices were silenced. My point is that the era that silenced the Black deacons had a contour that we still hear about today as relevant for deacon identity. I just had a conversation with someone who was certain that the church was best served by deacons *not* having votes. He had good reasons. He was concerned that we didn't have enough theological education to influence policy. It's a point. People who make policy should have good background.

Is the silencing of deacon voices in the corridors of power a contour of a wave, something that we can agree to disagree on, depending on the context? Or would the church need to make sure that the voices of those ordained to interpret the world's needs, hopes and concerns are heard, so essential a feature of diaconal identity that it can't be abandoned in this way?

I am not using this example for how it enlightens us about racism. I am using it to demonstrate the dangers that lack of theological clarity about the essential features of deacons' identity holds. The problem can't be managed by looking at the *intentions* of those designing the wave's contours. It is more than likely that the church's perceived task at the time they silenced the Black deacons was healing the body of Christ, severed by a Civil War. More than likely, it was seen as an accommodation to people who were being readmitted to the Episcopal church as we re-coalesced with the Confederate Episcopal Church, who had been important leaders of our denomination. More than likely, those designing the contours of the first wave thought they were serving the will of God because unity trumped equality. What was a deacon, to this group? It was what the church needed a deacon to be: A deacon was a priest who was black. We needed his work, but he had to be watched closely.

I am trying to use this prior Wave of the diaconate to illustrate to inform our response to the challenges of today. We have to be able to tell people who we are, what is the non-negotiable core of our identity. We can't allow the church to morph us into whatever it wills. We can't allow theologians who have never lived the life to tell us what we are. *God* has to tell us what we are, what we are for, what are the essential contours of our identity that we must cling to, notice if they presumed upon.

I think that if deacons can articulate this stable core of deacon identity, share it widely and teach it clearly, we will have no problems with recruitment. We can *do* whatever we are asked to do; I have no opinion about what any deacon *does*. But I would like to advocate that we, we deacons, *must* take responsibility for this task. Instead of defining ourselves by what we are *not*, let's define ourselves by what we are. Instead of allowing others to define us in our absence, let's pull up to the table. Let's teach and preach and write about us ourselves, so our formation programs and seminaries can provide to *all* orders a clear picture of the essential features of diaconal identity. We are the ones who know it best.

It may have many contours, but at base, it's pretty simple. What we know is that *all* Christians are called to the work of diakonia, it is marked on their brow and a constitutive part of baptismal identity. What we know is that our identity, what deacons are *for*, is not to limit God's dream for his hungry and hurting people by doing all the work ourselves. What we know is that deacons shoulder a much bigger responsibility: the responsibility for *never letting the church forget that we are all servants*.

This is the nonnegotiable part of our identity that our wave has been blessed to offer to the church. It's what Suzanne figured out, what she meant by the title of her book, the unexpected consequences. When in 1970 the church renewed *baptismal* identity as the basis for all service, the church also, all unknowing, created the order that would never let the baptized forget it. We are there, at the door reminding them of it.

This generation of deacons are the blessed inheritors of a dual scriptural heritage. We have a heritage that, as John Collins has so skillfully shown, identified us as the agents and envoys to the world on behalf of the church. Philip converting the Ethiopian official and Stephen being stoned for evangelizing in the temple of the foreign Jews in Jerusalem is as much a part of our heritage as waiting on tables. The thing to note about the deacons in Acts is not that they humbly waited at table. The thing to note about the seven is that they were tasked to remember, and share God's bounty, with the *outsiders*: the Ethiopian, the foreign Jews in Jerusalem, the *Greek*-speaking widows who were being neglected by the community.

The Seven were called to *notice*. They were called by the apostles to be who we are today.

Carole Maddux puts it this way: “Deacons *know* who is hurting and hungry for God.” Deacons know, because we notice. It *matters* if noticing is somebody’s job. It matters, if it’s someone’s job to stand inside the church door and point out, over and over again. It matters if the church distracts us with other work, because they need us to. This identity is not hard to grasp, and it matters if we cling to it.

We serve a church that pre-Covid was groping for ways to cope with a culture that had lost all supports for church participation. We were groping for ways to preserve a church tainted, sometimes unfairly, by the revealed sins of toxic leaders, abusers, and racists. Our beloved church reflected this in our numbers, our programs, and in the dearth of vocations of all kinds. But just a few years ago we were all reading about the emerging church, the missional church, and community organizing. I was pretty sure then that we could still spruce up the church.

My take today is less sanguine. I don’t know where we are going, and neither do you. In such a time as this, however, I seriously think that our beloved church will not have much problem with deacon recruitment, if we do the work I have outlined. I think this is true because of the 200 young deacons and discerners on our young deacons facebook group. I think it’s true because of the statistics that show that our rate of replacing ourselves is much better than the other orders. I think this is true because if we can figure out who we are and what we need, we have a phalanx of new allies, including The Fund for the Diaconate, the Church Pension Group, the Society for the Increase of Ministry, Bexley-Seabury and many more, working together to support us, making their resources available. Many, many allies think we are worthy of proper support, support styled to meet our needs and the current situation, not what worked for other orders in a different era.

I have fears. I am worried that the church, in its panic, will encourage us to abandon that dearly bought core of diaconal identity I have just described. I think it’s possible that the church, in its confusion and fatigue, will tempt us, or shame us, into being the prop that allows the institutional church to go back to some shaky approximation of business as usual, only this time for a cut rate. The church is in such pain, and we are so generous. Deacons give our lives away. We will respond.

But I know *you*, after these nine years. I trust *you*. And I think God trusts you, to help our church hang onto this distinctive diaconate we have built, no matter the pressures we face to abandon it. If we can hang on to our essential identity, I think we are likely to save the church.

I think we will be an evangelism stealth weapon, if they let us. I think, and I have said before, that deacons incarnate what the world wants the Church to be today: selfless; responsible; convicting; generous; and just. We will help lead the church into a new future, not an anemic revival of an institutional past.

This is our moment. We are gospel bearers, worthy of authority. If we are united in this identity, and teach it to the church, we will be united in God's power. We will be a force for good, a cadre of godly people who will take the church by the hand and lead them out into the world and into the arms of Jesus, who we know is already there.

Everyone will want to join us, and recruitment will take care of itself.
