

Deacons as Developers of Lifelong Learning in the Church

By Deacon John Willets, PhD, with great thanksgiving for those who have supported this work through their conversations and contributions to the ideas contained herein.

The paper, *Lifelong Learning is a Moral Imperative*, is foundational to this paper.

The paper is presented for dialogue as to whether lifelong learning is a moral imperative. I continue with this paper to claim that deacons need to be models for and icons of lifelong learning in the church and that this claim is consistent with our ordination to the diaconate. I will not restate the case for lifelong learning, but let me reassert that it is a moral imperative, deriving from our commitment to the baptismal covenant, our commitment to living into the changing creation of God, and our living into the invitation and participation with Christ's mission.

Let me present this beginning point on which I will develop the assertion of this paper. From the Book of Common Prayer (p. 545) just before being vested for the first time as a deacon, the Bishop prays, "Make *him*, O Lord, modest and humble, strong and constant, to observe the discipline of Christ. Let *his* life and teaching so reflect your commandments, that through *him* many may come to know you and love you. As your Son came not to be served but to serve, may this deacon share in Christ's service, and come to the unending glory of him who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever." The Prayer Book then concludes in the rubric, *The People in a loud voice respond*, "Amen." [Emphasis added]

It is to the second section of the ordination prayer I draw the reader's attention. Specifically to that part that says "...Let *his* life and teaching so reflect your commandments, that through *him* many may come to know you and love you..." The purpose of this essay is to address the questions, challenges, preparedness, and commitment to the deacon's role as teacher. Therefore, let us consider particularly this prayer portion in combination, i.e., *...life and teaching...*, because one supports and exemplifies the other.

Let us turn to the assertion that deacons are to encourage others through their own examples to be lifelong learners. I believe this derives from the prayer that we ask God to demonstrate by our lives and teachings the commandments of God. Asking for and being assured of God's strength and power, deacons are both examples and teachers, animating the diaconal calling so that all the baptized can grow into our diaconal responsibilities as the church.

The deacon's life and teaching is to reflect God's commandments. They reflect God's commandments as seen through the body of Christ. Let us consider then God's commandments as given by Jesus: *The first and great commandment is to love God*,

and the second is like it to love others as you love yourself. The life and teaching of the deacon is to reflect this love with all its requirements as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

I do not want to offer the assertion that this is a unique diaconal function except insofar as it connects to the particular function of diaconal ministry, a ministry of service. I do not want to create or leave an impression that it is *only* deacons who have the responsibility to develop others into the skills of lifelong learning. However, deacons are charged and charged specifically to do our part in that development.

The Baptismal Covenant that is particularly diaconal

Among the baptismal promises the following are particularly diaconal:

1. To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
2. To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself.
3. To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Why do I claim these as particularly diaconal? Consider the charge to deacons, also from the Book of Common Prayer, as laid out by the bishop:

My brother, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.

As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.

My brother, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to the life and work of a deacon?

BCP, p. 543

To make Christ's redemptive love known by word and example is to animate the baptismal promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. As either deacons or laos wonder how to live into this promise, it is consistent that the deacons' lives are to model the proclamation and that deacons are to help others to develop the skill set to live into the promise. This is done both by example and by teaching.

To interpret to the church the hopes, needs, and concerns of the world is to exercise prophetic voice. It is to interpret in light of the good news, in light of God's justice, and in light of the prophetic vision as proclaimed by the prophets throughout holy scripture. To live into this charge is to animate Christ's mission as it pertains to striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. Deacons are called upon to help others develop the skill sets consistent with this promise and are specifically charged to do it.

Finally, deacons are charged at all times, that our lives and teachings are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself. Deacons are charged to animate to the church that we are all called to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. As in the other two cases, deacons are charged specifically to help others develop the skill sets necessary to live into this promise.

Deacons are called to be deacons for the purposes outlined in the charge expressed in the ordinal. Deacons are called to be deacons that the church may have a clear vision of Christ's servant ministry. All the baptized are charged with diaconal ministry; deacons are charged to help the church live into baptismal ministry as animators and icons of diaconal ministry. It is to miss the point if the church calls deacons to do the church's diakonia. It misses the point if the church calls deacons as professional ministers to do the church's diaconal ministry. All the baptized are charged with diakonia. Deacons are called to demonstrate it, help others live into it, and are charged specifically to do that through our examples, our proclamation, and our skills at developing others into servanthood. In short, we are models and teachers of diakonia. We are responsible for developing the lifelong learning of the church as it pertains to diakonia.

Called to be Christian

When I think about vocation, being called, I no longer think about it in first person, i.e., my vocation, my call, my decision, my gifts, etc., but have come to thinking about it in terms of our vocation, our calling, our decisions, our gifts. When did I come to this view? How have I come to this view? Why have I come to this view? Is it important? What changes when I change to this view?

I come to this view from many years as a baptized Christian and many years of being a deacon. I did not begin with this view and was much more grounded in the first person singular, I, me, my... rather than the first person plural, we, our, ours... Along the way I was influenced by many, many persons, much engagement with scripture, a lot of reflection, a lot of spiritual direction, and a lot of prayer. I could not begin to name the people who influenced me in this view for the list would be long and surely I would forget someone important. Who knows the subtleties in the conversations and the readings and the reflections and the prayer? Surely these subtleties were there. I suppose it comes from knowing that the church is about community and I take it seriously and almost literally that it is the body of Christ. The church is Christ made up of all the laos and in the visual imagery of Paul, we are the limbs, the face, the mouth, the body parts of the resurrected Jesus. We are the body of Christ resurrected and living

through time passing from generation to generation and what remains through all the generations is Christ... Christ's mission, Christ's ministry, and Christ's being. When I say I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, I think the church in this time and in this generation that will outlive this generation and continue manifest in the next.

Baptism is the rite, the symbol, the initiation into that Body and through that rite, we are added to the body according to our gifts. Our purpose is to share in Christ's mission and be whatever small part of the body we are gifted to be. But the call to be in and of the body is a call from God, through Christ, to the church. Is it my decision to be baptized? Interestingly enough, that is what it says on the cover of my baptismal certificate which I have to this day, "My Decision"; I'm not so sure!

I come from a tradition which did not baptize infants. This, however, is not a paper about the appropriateness of infant baptism. I don't know that it matters. This paper is about recognizing that all of us are called and ordered to share in Christ's mission. In so doing, we must constantly learn to grow in our gifts and action.

When do we know we are called into community?

Although I was baptized at the age of 13, I know that I did not know at 13-years-old that I was called into the community of Christ and was to exercise my gifts in the world as a member of that body. I do not think that the rite of baptism and the recognition that we are called to be Christian happen at the same time, regardless of the age of the baptized. I think we may respond to something deeper within us or something deep within our parents and then we are baptized. I think that the "something deep" is God's voice that calls us and that we are baptized into membership of the body of Christ through the rite. This is at first disconnected from the sense of vocation that develops from living out our membership in the Body. It is the living out our membership and our sharing in Christ's mission that informs us about our vocation as a member of the Body. Vocation in this concept is not something that happens once and then we are baptized, but rather we are baptized and the vocation develops, changes, becomes richer as we grow in our faith and put that faith into action. Vocation is much more organic than being fulfilled in a single rite. That we are called or our parents were called on our behalf to be baptized is not so much a decision we make but it is a decision made by Christ through the church.

It is the richness of the 1979 revision of the Book of Common Prayer, especially as it pertains to the baptismal rite and covenant, that is unique among the various denominational expressions of Christ's body and it brings with it a clarity about what we do as members of Christ's body. Living into the promises is to make manifest those aspects of the Christian life, i.e., koinonia, diakonia, kerygma, and metanoia. While I am focusing in this paper only on diakonia, I still make the claim that the church ordains deacons to be icons of service and animate that service in the church through the invitation and development of all members of the church into diakonia.

How do we develop others?

First we have to be committed to and model lifelong learning ourselves. We have to continually grow in our competences as we examine our lives against the baptismal covenant and the ordination promises. We have to assume the responsibility of

developing our own learning plans, finding learning resources, developing skills of independent and self-directed learning, and participating and collaborating with others to live into our responsibilities, assess our effectiveness, measure our appropriateness, and grow as we share our gifts for the church and the world.

Second, we have to call the baptized into their responsibilities of living into the covenant, responding to the invitation to Christ's mission, and being the church in the world. This requires that we keep the covenantal promises at the forefront as we work with the baptized. We need to help the laos make the connections between the opportunities for mission and ministry and make the connections to the promises we made.

Third, we need to gather resources for learning and teaching that are connected to the baptismal promises and the declaration of faith we make every time we renew our baptismal covenant. We need to call leaders from among the church and the world who can help in making the connections and providing windows of possibility for learning. At the same time, we need to be sure that the money and talent are marshaled and spent on the development of the baptized so they can be the church. We do that by advocating for and challenging the vestries, the stewardship committees, the formation and education directors, the clergy to pay attention to the congregational budgets so that they allocate in a visible and major way the lifelong commitment to the baptismal promises.

Fourth, we work with the deacons of the diocese to see to it that the bishops and standing committees take responsibility for Title III of the canons and that resources are allocated for the development of the ministries of all the baptized. This includes money, time, and talent.

Fifth, we deacons take seriously our commitment to the development of the baptized and model for others and call them to diaconal ministry so clearly that no one with whom we work and worship will fail to recognize what diaconal ministry means. To be able to do that well absolutely requires our commitment to lifelong learning as well as learning the skills necessary to develop ministry in others.

Here we are again.

As in the previous paper on lifelong learning I gave specific examples of how to develop a learning plan around the promises we make both as baptized members of the church and as ordained deacons. I then ended that paper with an invitation to dialogue about these ideas. Let me do here as I did there and add some questions with which to begin that dialogue.

1. Can others grasp the vision of diaconal vocation articulated here? If so, where are the connections to that vision we hold in common and, if not, where do we depart?

2. Are all the ordained called, as deacons are, to develop a climate of lifelong learning throughout the church? If so, how do priests and bishops animate their offices as icons for the church?
3. What are the resources necessary to be a learning church, living into Christ's mission? Are the organizational structures of the church willing to make these resources available to all the baptized?

As before, let me end where I began. Deacons are responsible for the development of lifelong learning skills as they pertain to the baptized and the church's call into servant ministry.