



The Vocational Diaconate in the Scottish Episcopal Church

As a Province, the Scottish Episcopal Church has been developing a renewed appreciation for this Order of ministry in the past decade, aided by conversations with other Provinces in the Anglican Communion (chiefly TEC and Canada) and ecumenical partners in the Porvoo Communion, the Church of Scotland and the Methodist Church. This booklet summarises all that has been agreed by the Scottish Episcopal Church in the past decade about the church's understanding of the Vocational Diaconate.

Understanding the vocational diaconate: In 2019, the College of Bishops agreed changes to the rite for the ordination of deacons in order to honour the distinctiveness of two differing vocations: that of ordinands discerning a call to the presbyterate but entering into a transitional period in deacon's orders, and that of those whose lifelong call is to the diaconate. The Faith and Order Board has asked the Liturgy Committee to consider these changes within a wider review of the Ordinal so that it may be made clear to the whole Church what the rediscovery of the vocational diaconate implies.

In the revision, the role of those called to this Order is described as follows:

In the name of the Church, deacons are sent to declare the kingdom of God and to care for those in need, serving God and the world after the pattern of Christ. They have a commitment to outreach and witness, advocacy and prophecy, flowing from their historic ministry for the poor, needy and sick, and seeking out the careless and indifferent. They are called to build bridges between the Church and the world, and to be an expression of the unconditional love of God.

Parsing these three sentences adverts to a renewed understanding of the role of Deacons, common to many traditions and denominations: the primacy of **being sent by**; a ministry which is focussed upon the **Kingdom of God**; one which combines **service and proclamation, care and advocacy**; and its **bridge-building** nature.

Such an understanding stems from significant lexicographical work published in 1991 by the New Testament scholar John Collins, who examined the meaning of *diakonía* and its cognates in classical and biblical Greek texts and proposed a wider range of meaning for the words than previously allowed. Hitherto interpreted as having connotations of menial service, Collins's research suggested that other meanings should be added, chief amongst which were those of 'message', 'agency' and 'attendance':

The sense 'to serve at table' cannot be called 'the basic meaning' — in fact that sense has to be perceived as a particular application of a word capable of signifying doing messages and being another person's agent — and 'the more comprehensive idea of "serving"' is vague and inadequate. The root idea expressed by the words is that of the go-between [...] express[ing] concepts about undertakings for another, be that God or man, master or friend.ⁱ

Diakonía is thus more than humble service; it signifies the undertaking of a task or mandate commission by another, of ‘being sent forth to fulfil a task on behalf of the one who has the authority to send’.ⁱⁱ Subsequent scholarship has concluded that ‘there are no substantial problems with Collins’s interpretation of *diakonía* and its cognates’ⁱⁱⁱ and his reading has been largely accepted, with huge and exciting consequences for the interpretation of ‘ministry’. As the report of the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England put it, Collins’s proposal shifts the focus ‘from what is done — the act of loving service — to why it is done — because someone has been commissioned by God or by the church.’^{iv}

Collins’s findings have since been mapped onto the role of the ecclesial deacon, such that the term ‘emissary’ has been adopted in many quarters alongside ‘servant’ as an interpretation of *diakonos*. Deacons are seen as having an apostolic, missionary function, being sent by God in the name of the Church to proclaim the good news in word and deed beyond the doors of the place in which the worshipping community meets, and to galvanize that community to live its diaconal vocation in the world.

In the other direction, they gather into the Eucharist the needs and concerns of that wider world, representing them and offering them up to God — or enabling others so to do — in the midst of the worshipping community Sunday by Sunday. They are:

Holy stirrers, dancing on the edge of the Church, facing outwards, building bridges, taking church to the community, to people who don't usually encounter it, and taking the community to the church, encouraging the baptized to carry out their ministry.^v

Deacons are people ‘on a mission, a messenger or ambassador — making connections between liturgy and pastoral need, building bridges between the life of the Church and those who are not yet within it.’^{vi} They straddle the boundary between church and public square, discerning Christ at work in both locations and helping others make the crossing. As such they require the skill of bilingualism: the ability to understand the cultures of church and community, speak both languages and facilitate dialogue between the two.

As agents of transformation, they may find themselves addressing ‘structures of power and political stakeholders’,^{vii} working with those on the margins to transfigure all that countermands God’s shalom in the world. The role demands skills in advocacy and a ‘regrounding in the prophetic tradition’,^{viii} speaking truth to power, critiquing the status quo and energizing others to join in the work.

Nor is it simply the world that gets critiqued. Deacons may find themselves also calling out apathy within the Church, tackling structures and systems which inhibit mission and prevent the budding into growth of new ways of being. As those who cross boundaries, Deacons are well placed to serve as pioneers and planters, moving into new contexts and breaking fresh ground; being ‘bridges between a church that is stuck, and a church that is moving forward; a church that is anxious about her survival, and a church into which the Spirit’s breath is blowing vibrant new life’.^{ix} In short, the diaconal calling is to be a sign of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church. Deacons are agents of the Kingdom, both within the Eucharist and the world:

The Deacon’s Kingdom-orienting voice of prophecy and challenge acts as a powerful advocate within the Christian community for those who have no voice; it challenges vested interest and complacency, and urges the Christian community to live its own serving and transforming ministry to the full in the world beyond the perceived borders of the Church.^x

The diaconate enacts and brings into focus a central aspect of the Church’s missionary being, namely the diaconal calling of the whole Church to proclaim the revelation of the gospel of Christ to the world. The primary thrust of a Deacon’s ministry is thus the enablement of *others* to fulfil their own vocations to be ambassadors of the Gospel and apostles in the midst of daily life. As [Truly Called to Serve as a Deacon](#) put it so presciently in 1987,

Far from clericalising lay leadership or monopolising opportunities to serve, the ministry of Vocational Deacons will proclaim the Church’s commitment to the transformation of human society by the Reign of God, will renew enthusiasm for the Church in members who are depressed by its seeming introversion, will promote a more outward-looking social conscience among Church people generally, and will generate new forms of lay ministry.^{xi}

The SEC's [criteria for selection](#) match this renewed understanding of the Deacon's role. What is looked for include capacities – both evidenced and emergent - for engaging in mission and evangelism and equipping disciples:

E1 Candidates demonstrate their commitment to mission and evangelism in their thought, prayer and action. They demonstrate an excitement about the loving and saving purpose of God for the world, and have a firm desire to share this by word and deed.

E2 Candidates have a knowledge and understanding of mission and evangelism. They are alert to the opportunities for engagement with contemporary culture and are sensitive to the demands of particular contexts.

E4 Candidates are committed to developing the discipleship of others. They are able to nurture the faith of others and to equip others to witness to their faith in Christ.

In addition, there is a clear expectation that innovative, creative and entrepreneurial initiative will shape their ministry, with a deep focus on contextual priorities:

F4 Candidates have the potential to lead strategically. They are able to look forward in an imaginative and theologically-informed way. They can take the initiative and have a creative, entrepreneurial approach. They are prepared to take risks and to implement a process of change with flexibility and resilience.

F5 Candidates understand and work with the dynamics of a community.^{xii}

Equally candidates should be keenly aware of and responsive to need, both in individuals and in society as a whole, and be people who are particularly challenged by injustice and oppression. This diaconal concern for God's mission of loving, healing and restoring the world expresses itself in deeply practical and pastoral ways. Thus as it says in the introduction the [Pastoral Offices for Deacons](#), 'Deacons are to be found sharing with others in compassionate care for the sick, the weak and the marginalised, and in equipping other disciples for this service.'^{xiii}

Training pathway: Hitherto diaconal candidates have followed the standard DipHE route at the Scottish Episcopal Institute, the only accommodation to their particular vocation being found in the choice of placement; see [‘Formed in the Field’](#). Given that their ministry is increasingly understood to be largely one of engagement with people beyond the church’s walls - a missional ministry of community activism, pioneering and social enterprise - it is only logical that their training should involve a larger component of practical placement work and be weighted towards missional modules. From August 2021 the following modules will be taught as part of a dedicated diaconal curriculum, with the option of ‘extended placements’ running alongside: *‘Elements of Ministry and Mission in Context’*; *‘Community Development and the Church’*; *‘Biblical Perspectives on Social Justice and Equality’*; *‘Exploring Leadership and Theology for Ministry and Mission’*; *‘Mission Entrepreneurship : Practice’*; *‘Theological Perspectives on Community Development’*; *‘Community Transformation’*.

Deployment, Supervision and Support through IME 4-6: Once ordained, all such Deacons will have a pastoral and liturgical ‘base’ in a congregation or group of congregations in which they are sustained and have a liturgical role. To this extent they will be supported by, and under the direction of, the local incumbent. In addition every Deacon should come directly under the supervision of the Bishop. The [Working Agreement](#), drawn up by Bishop and Deacon together, spells out the relationship with the supporting congregation and incumbent, but also details that the Bishop should meet regularly with the Deacon for supervision and theological reflection.

These understandings have long been held by, and embedded in the polity of, our Church. The 1987 report [Truly Called by God to Serve as a Deacon](#) states:

It must be clearly stated that Deacons, while being communicant members of congregations, having a liturgical ministry and dovetailing with the work of presbyters, are primarily a task force at the disposal of the Bishop, for work, most of which is out in the world. They have their proper place in a diocesan rather than a congregational strategy of mission. They are a pioneer corps rather than auxiliaries to share the load of existing intra-congregational ministries.^{xiv}

Even if the Deacon's primary placement is in a local charge, he or she should also be seen to have a diocesan role in supporting and enabling the whole people of God in the diocese to grasp their baptismal calling to *diakonía* in its broadest sense. This should be set out in the [Working Agreement](#).

As the Bishop is supervisor or co-supervisor in a Deacon's probationary years, it follows that the annual Review of Deacons during [Initial Ministerial Education 4-6](#) should be conducted in a slightly different way from that of other curates. The Diaconate Worship Group (DWG) suggests in these cases inviting an 'outside' observer into the process to sign off the Review. The three participants thus meet for the Review and agree the outcomes and objectives for the following year; these are then shared with the IME 4-6 Coordinator for his/her dispassionate comment and approval.

Newly ordained Deacons belong to a Province-wide Chapter of Deacons, set up in 2021 and facilitated by the Revd Norma Higgott, herself a Deacon. Deacons in their first years of ministry are thus expected not only to join in the IME 4-6 programme available in their diocese or region, but also to meet with diaconal colleagues from across the Province and share in fellowship and training sessions shaped around their vocational calling. The Convenor of the Chapter provides mentorship of Deacons in IME 4-6 alongside that offered by the regional IME4-6 Co-ordinator.

The Chapter also maintains strong links with ecumenical diaconal groups within and beyond Scotland, helping to facilitate dialogue between traditions and highlight the diaconal calling common to all Christian churches. The Scottish Episcopal Church is a member of DRAE (DIAKONÍA Region Africa-Europe), one of three regional groups of the DIAKONÍA World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities.

Within the SEC, the Rt Revd Dr John Armes, Bishop of Edinburgh, convenes the Diaconate Working Group, a pendant committee of the Faith and Order Board. The Group was tasked initially by that Board with producing an SEC response to the Porvoo Communion's second Consultation on Diaconal Issues held in Oslo in April 2009. Since then there has been a growing awareness in the Province of the significance of the diaconal calling and the Group has continued to offer advice to the Board and to advocate good practice.

Deacons and the Reserved Sacrament: While Deacons can and should lead services of Extended Communion to those in the community unable to participate in services in a church building – the sick and the housebound, for instance - Deacons should not lead Communion from the Reserved Sacrament (mustard book) in church and especially not as the main Sunday service, as this blurs the boundaries. Instead usage of the Service of the Word should be encouraged.

Liturgical role: Deacons are essential to liturgy. They draw on the talents of others in the assembly. They help presiders to preside and assistants to assist. The Deacon plays a collaborative role with the presiding celebrant, whether Bishop or Priest. This way of sharing liturgical leadership is integrated and visibly weaves different ministries together, including that of the congregation. A detailed description of the deacon's liturgical role is to be found [here](#).

The Deacon's traditional ministry in the liturgy - calling the community to confession of their sins; proclaiming the gospel; preaching; leading prayers of intercession; receiving the gifts and preparing the altar for Holy Communion; assisting the president with the distribution of Communion; and sending the community out in the service of the Lord - represents the ministry of service and mission of the whole Church. The Deacon does not do any of these things *instead of* other people. As has been said repeatedly throughout this booklet, Deacons are sacramentally dedicated to a ministry of proclamation, service and mission to be a sign and model of that ministry which belongs to the whole people of God. Since *diakonía* is characteristic of all Christians, the significance of the Order of Deacons lies in its capacity to provide a focus for what is proper to the Church as a whole.

Study of the Deacon's stance in liturgy speaks volumes about the ministry of *diakonia*. At two points early on in the Eucharist Deacons stand *amongst* others - for the proclaiming of the Gospel and for the leading of the Prayers of the People - quite literally surrounded by the assembled congregation whom they serve. On both occasions the assembly indicates its full involvement in and 'ownership' of the action by engaging in dialogue: variously, the call and response at the outset and end of the Gospel reading and the offering of congregational responses in the intercessions.

Standing amidst and on a level with others in an authorised role and yet being at the same time the servant of all says something profound about diaconal leadership. Deacons thereby model 'distributed leadership' through the whole body of Christ, encouraging all to grow as responsible disciples and take ownership of the missional vocation of the charge, realising their part in the overall enterprise. The diaconal call and response and the positioning of the Deacon as she reads the Gospel or leads the Prayers of the People speak of that dyadic relationship of mutual exchange and co-responsibility for leadership that should occur in a healthy community of practice.

Later in the Liturgy the Deacon stands at the altar but to one side, while the priest, centrally, presides at the Eucharist. Stands to one side having prepared the table for the meal by setting out linen and elements so that others may draw near to eat and drink. Stands to one side in such a way that pages may be turned for the priest whose hands are otherwise occupied; stands to one side ready to invite all to say the Lord's Prayer, ready to raise – and to assist in the administration of – the chalice at Communion. Stands to one side, poised and ready, complementary, utterly necessary, but not centre stage, reminding the congregation of a crucial attitude of heart in the exercise of all ministry.

Finally the Deacon stands at the door to declare the dismissal, bidding the assembly to embark on the liturgy after the Liturgy, their daily lives of *diakonia* in the world; encouraging them to look outwards, to make connections. This third stance likewise says something fundamental about diaconal leadership; that it is world-facing. All too often the 'ministry' of lay people is seen as being purely ecclesiastical. Sunday by Sunday, Deacons reorient the congregation to cease gazing upon the altar and turn them around to face the altar in the world. As one form of service ends, so does another begin: the people's daily work. Deacons call the people of God to pay attention to their workaday contexts; reminding them that God is in all things and is to be found at all times and in all places.

Direct or 'per saltum' ordination: This pattern is customary in many of the SEC's Porvoo partners. The issue has indeed been raised in the Scottish Episcopal Church, but there has been no appetite to explore it further at this stage.

Some principles:

- the Order of Deacons is an essential part of the Church's self-understanding
- a Deacon is not a priest-manqué(e); in other words, a Deacon must not be defined by what s/he cannot do, but rather understood for what s/he signifies about the Church.
- the diaconal role is to point the Church outwards to the world as signified liturgically by the proclamation of the Gospel, the leading of the Prayers of the People and the Dismissal, and by the Deacon's stance in the Liturgy at those points. In the Pauline Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, *diakonía* often refers to the ministry of proclamation of the gospel of God's revelation in Christ (e.g. 2Cor. 5:18; Eph. 5:7). The imagery is that of a herald or go-between who carries the gospel from God or Christ to those who are to hear the message of salvation.
- the Deacon works as one under another's authority, primarily the Bishop's, and always in collaboration in the liturgy, never solo.
- the spirituality of someone in diaconal orders is not about self-aggrandisement or leadership in the 'solo' sense but about encouraging, equipping and enabling the people of God to be all they can be, and stepping back when members of the laity can take over a task.
- there is an *ecclesiological* difference between the equipping role of the Deacon and the pedagogical role of the Reader; this is a more helpful way of understanding the differences between the two callings than one based purely upon functional differences. In [*Truly Called ..Two*](#) Bishop Brian Smith built upon Wesley Carr's three-fold typology in the following way:
'a Lay Reader is a lay person whose ministry lies within the Apostolic system in a charge. He/she engages in a preaching and teaching ministry, alongside the incumbent, within the charge. The Lay Reader is an 'apostolic' minister charged with teaching and preaching responsibilities. On the other hand the Permanent Deacon works within the Diaconal system, serving the charges and those who minister within them (Ordained and lay) and working in part as the pastoral arm of the bishop'.^{xv}

Diaconal fellowship

Since the beginning of 2021, Deacons in the Scottish Episcopal Church have met regularly for prayer, training and fellowship in a Provincial Chapter, the Convenor of which is the Revd Deacon Norma Higgott. They are members of DRAE (DIAKONIA Region Africa-Europe), one of three regional groups of the DIAKONIA World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities, and recently participated in its 25th anniversary Assembly here in Scotland. Deacons are regularly invited to participate in the Church of Scotland's Diaconate Council and Methodist Convocation, and also have links with the International Diaconate Centre, a movement for the renewal of the Permanent Diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church, receiving its regular publication *Diaconia Christi* and attending its gatherings. SEC Deacons also intend to be part of the World Diaconate Federation in due course.

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- i John Collins, *Diakonía: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 194.
- ii Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T and T Clark, 2005), p. 106.
- iii Paula Gooder, in 'Diakonía in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins', *Ecclesiology*, 3 (2006) 33-56 (p. 33).
- iv *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, GSMisc 854, The Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England (2007), 16.
- v <http://dwfmembers.org/oceania/new-zealand-danza/>
- vi 'Discerning the Diaconate' Ministry Division of the Church of England (2011).
- vii Stephanie Dietrich, 'Mercy and truth are met together' in *Diakonía as Christian Social Practice*, ed. by Stephanie Dietrich et al. (Regnum, 2014), pp. 28–45 (p. 43).
- viii Suzanne Watson Epting, 'Common Vows and Common Mission', *Anglican Theological Review*, 92.1 (2010), 71–87 (pp. 84–85).
- ix Suzanne Watson Epting, *The Prophetic Voice of the Deacon*, North American Association for the Diaconate Monograph Series 19 (2008),3.
- x Christine Hall, 'The socio-liturgical axis of the Deacon's ministry: sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God' in *The Ministry of the Deacon*;

Ecclesiological Explorations 2, ed. by Gunnel Borgegård et al. (Uppsala: Nordic Ecumenical Council, 2000), pp. 71–106 (p. 102).

- xi [*Truly Called by God to Serve as a Deacon: The Report of the Bishops' Working Group on Vocational Diaconate*](#) (1987), General Synod Office, 10-11
- xii [*Ministries in the Scottish Episcopal Church*](#) (2018), 11
- xiii [*Pastoral Offices for Deacons*](#). Authorised for experimental use in the Scottish Episcopal Church General Synod Office (2017)
- xiv [*Truly Called by God to Serve as a Deacon: The Report of the Bishops' Working Group on Vocational Diaconate*](#) (1987) General Synod Office, 12. This statement was underlined - and fleshed out by means of case studies - in the subsequent report on the Diaconate to issue from the SEC, [*Truly Called ..Two*](#), published in 2012
- xv 'Deacons and the life of the Church' Rt Revd Brian Smith in [*Truly Called ... Two*](#) GSO (2012) Appendix 1.