



Deacons in the Pension Fund #3 – Why it really matters if more deacons are effectively included.

By Lori Mills-Curran, Executive Director
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One of the factors that motivated me to write this series of columns for Deacon Update is my own awareness that I personally just *fell* into eligibility for a church pension. As I related in a prior article, I had given up on my diaconate and “taken a lay job.” The parish treasurer where I had a new job as a Director of Religious Education called to enroll me, but was told that he *had* to put me in for a clerical pension. Think through the series of fortunate accidents that enabled me to end up with this pension:

First, my ordaining diocese recorded my ordination in 1988, in an era when many diaconal ordinations went unrecorded. (I did not know it was recorded or the significance of recordation. A recent AED survey confirmed that many deacons do not know if their ordination is recorded or not.) So, first off, thank God someone in Rio Grande recorded me properly.

Second, after 13 years as a deacon, I got a paid job in a church. I had been a government special needs lawyer for kids, and I was not allowed to talk about God at work. I had economic privilege and a saintly husband. So, I decided to work part-time with kids at a church, I was not seeking licensure as a deacon, and so they let me. That was pretty random for a lawyer, and for a parish.

Finally, the parish treasurer carefully followed through on the perplexing messages he received from CPG about how I was actually a cleric. I don’t know why he didn’t just deep-six the whole issue; I would not have blamed him if he had. We all thought I was lay. But he called CPG and teased out the details. And he happened to get good phone advice from CPG, in a prior era when the quality was much better.

My point is that a lot of stars had to align for me to understand the reality that what canon law and CPG said I was, and how my parish and diocese functionally regarded me, were in conflict.

This is unique to the diaconal world. *All* clerics may have difficulties arise in the accessing of pension benefits. Many pitfalls can compromise pension eligibility or value: breaks in service when assessments are lost; failure to pay assessments through parish poverty; disorganization on the part of parish or diocesan staff. The difference is that priests are alerted from prior to ordination to be on the lookout for these problems, and they don’t live within a system where there is so much confusion (indeed denial) about what the canons say they are. They are acculturated to accept a belief that they are entitled to information about the pension system, and to prompt and expeditious resolution of pension difficulties.

This is a good thing. People need this kind of assurance, if they are to do a good job of important work: spreading the Gospel. The theology behind the system needs no defense. If it

ever did, Bp. Lawrence, who founded the Church Pension Fund in 1913, had won that debate. In *Outlasting Marble and Brass: The History of the Church Pension Fund*, he is quoted, “There is, as a rule, money enough in the people’s income to support the Church I have known a Parish to raise enough money in a few weeks to purchase a fine organ, while their Rector, an efficient man, silently endured the shame of unpaid bills because his salary was in arrears.” (p. 84).

For all of you who are thinking, “our organ’s a mess right now,” let me assure you that Bp. Lawrence was criticized for these views. Everyone knew he was a Boston Brahmin, a scion of wealthy mill-owners in my diocese, Massachusetts. But he and his fellows rallied the church to own the conviction that ensuring priests’ freedom from poverty in retirement, and from worry about it along their vocational path, was a way of serving the Gospel. It took many years, and many diocesan conventions, before the whole church was compelled to participate in the pension fund by canon law. But Bp. Lawrence’s conviction that *this was Gospel work* is the reason for the pension fund’s existence. Monies were found from various sources, including donations obtained by personal appeals to wealthy people, to ensure the project could begin.

Methods have been faithfully refined to fulfill their goal, beyond simply creating the systems to hold the money carefully. Over many years, CPG has also built an extensive apparatus to educate parishes and dioceses about the system. CPG has a whole department to provide training, including residential workshops and webinars, to diocesan and parish personnel responsible for maintaining the records and making the payments.

CPG has a whole department dedicated to educating pension recipients, too. Besides regular written communication, and as its resources greatly increased through wise investment, CPG created many ways for clerics in the system to be informed and supported. Among the newer ways are Credo retreats for experienced clerics and Fresh Start groups for new ones. CPG’s mission clearly is eliminating any ignorance on the part of the cleric which will impede financial well-being. In latter years, these offerings have expanded to include concern for the spiritual and physical health of clerics as well. Credo is now as much about physical and spiritual health as it is about finances.

Today, this education starts even earlier. In residential weekends called *Success After Seminary*, CPG has collaborated with the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF) to invite seminarians to experience an initial comprehensive financial wellness event. Since CPG can’t spend money on people who are not contributors, they worked with ECF to secure a Lilly grant to fund it. The event includes a full tutorial on the pension system, as well as basic financial education, debt management advice, and an introduction to the ministry resources of ECF. The homework for the weekend is to contact CPG and begin to develop a relationship. Finally, the seminarians are also offered an opportunity to apply for a matching grant to offset seminary debt.

The creativity going into *Success After Seminary* shows significant adaptation on CPG's part to a new priestly reality. Seminary debt is a huge problem, and young people enter with way too much undergraduate debt. The priest crop is shrinking fast, and one of the reasons is that priests are not always able to find full-time jobs. (CPG's own research says that the norm for future priests will be to be bi-vocational.) So this program is a well-tailored vehicle to suit the needs of securing the priestly vocations essential to our church. All of this is a *wonderful* thing.

CPG is committed to the wellbeing of clerics out of strong ideological conviction. It is breathtakingly idealistic in its aim because of one significant conviction that undergirds all of its work: *the Gospel suffers when clerics are impoverished*.

Despite what deacons generally think, CPG is not the problem. There is no canonical or theological impediment in CPG's way to prevent them serving deacons as well. The *Church's* willingness to help us be educated and creative about getting access to the pension fund is, in my opinion, the crux of the issue. You don't make phone calls to request ministry supports of which you are completely uninformed. You can't submit applications you are told to throw away. You can't appeal denials for lack of recordation when you don't know what recording is. You don't question your Canon to the Ordinary (or your bishop!), when you ask about a resource being available and are assured, mistakenly, that it isn't.

Why are we so ignorant? Cynics believe it's on purpose, basic disrespect. Bitter deacons, and former deacons, abound. I think the challenge is different.

I think the challenge is for the church to believe what they have said we are: clerics, genuinely ordained people, whose path is distinct from priesthood, but who also bear the Gospel in a manner essential to the church's identity. The church must genuinely act as if it believes that we are no longer simply undereducated permanently eucharistically-inhibited priests. It must live into the unexpected consequences of a commitment made almost 50 years ago: that it was going to set a renewed diaconate loose to show the world that the Episcopal Church cares deeply about the diaconal mission of God, and that diaconal identity is as characteristic of Christian identity as the priesthood of all believers.

The confusion is saddest in situations where deacons work side by side with priests, in the same jobs, in chaplaincies for institutions like hospitals and schools. Priests are regularly coached on how to apply to their bishop for something called a Letter of Extension of Ministry. A bishop can grant this designation to the employment of a cleric. Then, compensation received from this work is considered assessable. But the work has to be related to what is considered a cleric's essential functions, and that work is defined as "pastoral care."

Chaplaincies and teaching are the classic cases in which this accommodation has regularly been offered to priests. The cleric then may arrange to have the institution pay assessments to CPG on their behalf. Their pension is assured, and it is almost always better than the one the cleric

can otherwise get from the institution. Deacons doing the same work are not treated similarly. The *work* is the same, the credentials for chaplaincy (units of CPE, advanced degrees and the like) are the same. But the cleric is not deemed to be, because priestly identity is normative.

Somehow, diaconal identity is not yet normative anywhere. Because, the opposite situation occurs when a deacon succeeds in securing paid employment, outside the church, doing what most deacons believe they are called to do: serving the least, the last, and the lost. Perhaps this employment is for an institution dedicated to social outreach for the homeless, drug addicts, sex workers. Maybe it's for the Red Cross. Deacons experience long periods of indignity trying to get pension eligibility, writing and rewriting their applications for letters of extension to characterize as "pastoral care" the work they do in serving (sometimes founding and funding!) nonprofits that serve the people they are ordained for.

Priests doing the same work are lauded, as they should be, and they get their letter of extension. Bishops, in my experience, go out of their way to find a way to characterize some aspect of a priest's work for these kinds of institutions as "pastoral care." Deacons usually experience denial, delay, shaming, or outright hostility, even though arguably *their* call should be deemed normative for this work. (All over Europe and Latin America this kind of work whether for church, government or in the nonprofit sector is literally called *Diaconia*.)

I don't think the issue is really about deacons wanting to be paid by churches. Deacons regularly spin straw into gold. There is never any money for diaconal ministries, and we never give up on an idea because there is no money for it. We are pre-adapted to an impoverished church. Can you *learn* from us how to wrangle resources from a recalcitrant, sinful, greedy world? When we do it, can you *free us* from worry about poverty by letting us participate in this great system, so carefully organized and maintained by the saints for the church's work?

The question is whether when resources *are* available for ministry, from the church or other sources, the church will regard us as members of a Gospel-bearing class. Do all Christians have a call to *diakonia* as well as being part of the priesthood of all believers? Can the church, for that reason, come to believe our work is as worthy of access to what supports the church can find, from wherever, in this new era?

It will require some self-discipline on the part of the church, and the pressure will be hard to resist. It's always been hard. In fact, we have allowed you to morph us into whatever you needed us to be at a given time, in a given place. That's why we are so contextually defined. It's not theological chaos: it's a gift we have given the church by allowing ourselves to be defined and redefined in the image you need us to be in any given context. (Until the internet, we didn't even know it was happening. We just fought amongst ourselves as to who was a "real" deacon.)

It's getting harder to maintain the self-discipline required. The Episcopal Church (TEC) will not be able to ask us to regularly provide a Eucharist from pre-sanctified elements ("a deacon's mass") to the last twelve grey heads in the pews. When a parish is dying, TEC must not use us as cheap life support, unless it provides us also with priestly companions to go out into the neighborhood to see what Jesus is up to, so a new community can be gathered. When its priests are weary and worried, dioceses can't put "more deacons" into their strategic plans in order to continue to do business as usual when TEC can't afford it anymore. (Business needs to be distinctly *unusual* to get the job done in our current evangelism environment.) We can no longer be utilized merely as attractive but inessential liturgical ornaments. And TEC must stop using our servant identity as a weapon to shame us away from expressing any needs.

I say again, TEC doesn't have to *pay* us. It's clear you can't. Many of us do have "private means," as TEC so conscientiously required of the perpetual deacons from 1954-1970. Many of us are retired and *do* have an independent income. But our economic well-being must be at least *considered*, and planned for, at the church's highest levels, and consistently.

We need to be *wise* fools. We may *volunteer* for the economic consequences of a diaconate, but it should not be in an environment as filled with mixed messages, poor communication and shame as our current situation. It's not good for us; we get cranky and resentful. We get prideful around priests, holier than thou. We angle for the only dignity on offer, that of priesthood. And we die from uninsured cancers, or drive school buses in our 80's, to afford our meds.

We need to fix this. There are over 100 young people on AED's "Young Deacons" Facebook page. They *are* fools for Christ. They *will* give their lives away, at least until they want to buy a house. TEC shouldn't require them to, or even worse, tell them their moral credibility as prophets is compromised if they get involved with filthy lucre. It's a futile project to seek more young deacons, unless we grapple with these issues in earnest. We will eat our own young.

And what about deacons of color? How will we ever recruit enough deacons of color to serve those who TEC knows we are called to serve today? It's a very different thing to claim a comfortless servant identity is constitutive of our call when you spring from the people who supplied actual servants to the privileged. Will people of color ever buy our story, about how it's good to be poor? How can we ask them to? Won't they see through it, to the fact that well-off deacons do fine, and poorer deacons end up snatching the gas cards their parishioners offer, simply to *be able to get to* those they are called to serve?

Bp. Lawrence would not have shamed today's deacons for seeking access for all possible tools to fulfill our call. He would have started writing letters to his rich friends.

Up next: Building a coalition to better the economic well-being of ALL deacons, and why I trust CPG to help.