

Deacons in the Pension Fund #4: Why I trust CPG to help *all* deacons.

By Lori Mills-Curran, Executive Director
February 2019

In this last article I am going to indulge my fancy. I am going to describe a world in which CPG and deacons are allies, among a crowd of allies, building better well-being for *all* the deacons of the church, not just those few who are paid by it. At one point I said that deacons could not “trust CPG (yet) to advise us well.” I said that because I know many deacons get bad advice from CPG, when they call naively on the phone and tentatively ask for information.

But I am writing these articles because I have come to trust CPG. Whatever the limitations are on CPG’s ability to advise deacons, I stand in witness to their efforts to better serve us. I have seen their commitment to better understand us over the years I have been working with them (sometimes not so politely) during my tenure as AED’s Executive Director.

- I saw their amazement at the first listening session I ever attended with them in 2014, when deacons told them most of us never have contact with deployment officers, where CPG educational efforts are focused. They didn’t know we never get their information.
- I heard their bemused responses when certain deacons told them they had turned down Letters of Extension of Ministry (offered by their bishops!) for nonprofit work, because these deacons felt financial entanglement with the church compromised their diaconal identity. CPG knew nothing of the entire body of theology that says deacons have no moral credibility as prophets if we are paid.
- I watched CPG rewrite their communications to all newly ordained deacons to tell us that we are eligible for assessments if compensated. They had just learned that we are often told the opposite.
- I found the footnote in a CPG report that disallowed a long-standing practice. Transitional deacons (only) had long been given permission to “buy themselves into” the pension fund while looking for church work after ordination, by paying their own assessments. They saw that it wasn’t fair that one kind of deacon could buy in but another couldn’t, so they changed the rule.

I have seen CPG grow in understanding that getting our assessments paid is not so simple, even when the rules are clear that we should.

- I sensed irritation with a ritzy Episcopal school, when all its priest chaplains were enrolled in the pension fund as a matter of course, while a deacon’s request (for identical work) was delayed and denied for years. When the CPG rep heard that the

deacon was finally put into the teachers' much less beneficial program, the rep said such institutions "could often be crafty" in trying to balance their books.

- I saw CPG fight (very politely) with a deacon who misunderstood CPG's rules. She was determined to take an action that would destroy her eligibility for a valuable clerical pension, on the advice of her loving but confused rector.
- Finally, I saw them come to the conviction that they knew next to nothing about us, or of our challenges. They saw they needed to study us, with significant professional-quality research. So they did.

For several years, I have seen CPG staffers come to AED and the Fund for the Diaconate events and meetings, sometimes in the face of significant hostility, and graciously respond. I have seen them double down on their efforts to know us and advise us, everywhere they can, at significant expense, in order to make sure we know what we need to know. I have even deposited the check they gave us, for \$2,500, to underwrite our next Triennial.

I have *not* seen CPG think we do not bear the Gospel. Their self-expression is sometimes awkward. Sometimes they say things in public which fall harshly on the ear of deacons; they are still learning. But it is my conviction that the upper echelon of CPG supports attending to our economic challenges. I think it is only a matter of time until they do for us what they are doing for seminarians and bi-vocational priests: try to help us strategize as to how we can get access to CPG benefits, *in some form*, even if we can't be regularly paid by the church, in the old-style normative full-time priestly way.

We still feel overlooked by CPG. But we *are* included in the Blue Book Report they submit to General Convention. We are included in their new rule changes of 2018. We don't see the word "deacon" much in these reports, that specific word. But to CPG, since 1970, a deacon is a deacon. Everything they write about "nonstipendiary" and "part-time" clergy applies to us, and they know the state of the church is causing an avalanche of such *priestly* clerics to be clamoring for better benefits, as *they* move into the gig economy. More and more priests are patching together employment that looks nothing like what priest life used to be like; more and more of them are nonstipendiary. We are being borne along with the tide to help these folks because CPG is carrying us. There are candidates on the CPG board who describe themselves in their election materials as being primarily interested in finding ways to expand services to *nonstipendiary* clergy. Being sensitive to the needs of such clergy is a credential, now, not a problem.

People are sometimes surprised when I say that I really don't think all that many deacons need to be paid, *by the church, right now*. I think deacons may be here to show the church that business as usual, working entirely for those within the building, is not a viable path any more. We all have to think differently. I dream of a reality in which diaconal work is paid by the church, because having deacons lead the people into an expression of their baptismal call to

diakonia is considered as important to the parish as what priests do. But until the church stabilizes itself economically (if it ever can), more nuanced approaches are more realistic.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the history of the diaconate in The Episcopal Church (TEC) does show that deacons *do* tend to morph into what the church wants them to be. This is a problem when the diaconate becomes a place to hold people away from the priesthood unjustly because they are black or Native American or female. This is a problem when it leads TEC to require an order to be financially privileged, like the perpetual deacons of 1954-1970. It can also be a problem in this generation.

The big challenge for TEC today, in my mind, is to have the courage to step away from doing business as usual. By balancing their budgets on the backs of deacons who they have pulled into doing pastoral work for free in cash-strapped parishes with exhausted priests, they will blur the charism of the diaconate we have built together for the last 50 years.

That diaconate is concerned with the well-being of the least, the last and the lost. Any diaconal theology that completely leaves the least, the last and the lost behind, that assigns deacons to providing pastoral care for a dying church, or being attractive liturgical ornaments that serve for free because “we can’t afford anything better,” is capitulation to failure. We have failed to evangelize. We have failed the Jesus Movement.

Our job as deacons is to help the church realize that deacons are gospel-bearers, worthy of whatever support the church can muster, with a call as constitutive of Christian baptismal identity as that of the priesthood of all believers. I don’t get any sense that CPG is confused about this.

I do sense that they are worried that we don’t understand that any benefits for us have to be paid for *somehow*. But I think that this funding can be found, and some people just plain don’t need any benefits. We can agree that there are persons called to nonstipendiary ministry in *all* orders, who never need access to CPG benefits, and who give the church the gift of declining them, consciously.

But if funding is needed, we can ally with CPG and others to think outside the box as to the *source* of the support. We can encourage Letters of Extension of Ministry and other mechanisms to help deacons (and priests) get dollars to flow into the pension fund from employers other than the parishes. We can seek grants from outside sources, such as the Episcopal Church Foundation, the Lilly Fund, or the Fund for Diaconate. Assessment dollars from the parishes don’t have to pay for deacon financial and spiritual education; they are already doing this for seminarians in the *Success after Seminary* program I discussed previously.

We can also seek donations in a campaign like Bishop Lawrence’s, who pulled in over six million in 1917; heaven knows the rich (including many deacons) are richer than they have ever been, and are seeking opportunities to make a difference. Dioceses can require parishes to put into deacons’ letters of agreement that they must have a monthly stipend of a minimal sum, which

might, if carefully structured, get them the minimum pension now that the minimum compensation rule has been eliminated. We could require dioceses, before they assign a deacon, to ascertain that the well-off parishes know they need to do this, and establish a diocesan fund to provide the money to parishes that don't have the money. We can establish a requirement that every diocese seek one or more financial sponsors for each deacon. We can have the "Diocesan Deacons Ball" every year, to raise funds.

I am verging on the ridiculous here. But I have a serious point: *We can seek partners everywhere in this important work, once we give deacons permission to seek the support, and find the allies, we need to live into the call of a full and equal order.*

I bet CPG would be willing to talk about all of this. Are we?

Are *deacons* a trustworthy ally in this work? Are we willing to give up our self-satisfaction of being holier-than-thou in relationship to paid priests? Are we willing to do the work to teach the church what it needs to know about us and our finances, even though the benefits will accrue to another generation of deacons? Are we willing to learn the complexities of CPG's functioning and take seriously their fiduciary responsibility to protect their resources, even when the \$13 *billion* they now hold looks to us like enough money to fly every deacon to the moon and back?

Finally, are we willing to support diaconal organizations like AED and the Fund for the Diaconate, with cash on the barrelhead from membership payments and donations sought, so they can lead the charge, with new allies found in every corner of the church?

I hope so. I pray so. May it be so.