

DIOCESAN FORMATION PROGRAMS AND  
SCHOOLS

**Study Conducted Under the Auspices of the**

**NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE DIACONATE**

**And**

**PEALL (Proclaiming Education for All) National Committee**

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## **FOREWORD: Forward from Thirty Years Ago**

Thirty years ago the former Council for the Development of Ministry of the Education for Mission and Ministry Unit at the Episcopal Church Center launched a study of the Diaconate. In the 1970's, there was great interest in reviving and renewing the historic order of the "permanent diaconate" by developing "new style" deacons who would be far more than sacramental assistants to the priest in congregational worship or carry the Reserve Sacrament to shut-ins. Rather, these "new style" deacons would symbolically represent Christ's servant ministry at the altar, but were envisioned as spending most of their time in counseling, teaching, visiting parishioners and particularly in leading outreach and encouraging parishioners to become active in service and mission. Deacons' distinctive ministry would be, as ordained leaders in communicating the needs and concerns of their community, nation and world to their congregations, dioceses and the Church, organizations then could provide needed ministries and resources.

This vision, however, was not universally accepted at the time, and where accepted still interpreted and implemented differently within dioceses. What kind of education and formation would this "new style" deacon need? What supports and resistance might be expected within dioceses to renewing and expanding the order of deacon? Should the deacon be raised up from and ordained to serve in a particular congregation, or was the deacon more the bishop's deacon to be deployed as the bishop directed within the diocese?

Between 1978 and 1985, the Council for the Development of Ministry sponsored several surveys of deacons, bishops, and COM Chairs, as well as supervising rectors in congregations with deacons assigned. Consultations followed, one involving thirty-one dioceses with or planning diaconal schools/formation programs, followed. These research studies and consultations resulted in a number of monographs and briefer reports.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among these reports, were those sponsored by the Council for the Development of Ministry, Education for Mission and Ministry Unit, including: *The Church, the Diaconate, the Future* (1979) presented to the

In 2008, under the jurisdiction of PEALL in collaboration with the North American Association for the Diaconate, two research projects were planned; (1) a survey of directors of diocesan schools/diaconal formation programs and (2) a survey of deacons. This report gives the results of the survey of leaders of diaconal schools/programs.

## **2008 SURVEY SAMPLE AND DESIGN FOR DIACONAL SCHOOLS**

In the spring of 2008, Deacon Susanne Watson Epting, Executive Director of the North American Association for the Diaconate (NAAD) headed the development and distribution of the survey of key diocesan programs and schools preparing persons for diaconate. In formulating questions she collaborated with Deacon John Willets and others in NAAD, and with Adair Lummis in construction of the survey for email distribution. Most of the survey questions represent areas known by NAAD leaders to be of current importance in developing diaconal formation programs. Some questions of general interest to PEALL are also included about diaconal school/program leaders' use of various networks and associations for developing their curricula.<sup>2</sup>

The major sample for this study consists of archdeacons, deans or directors of diaconal schools/programs who are also members of NAAD. In early March, Deacon Susanne Epting sent each of these individuals a cover letter explaining the study, and asking that they fill out and return the email survey attached. Susanne Epting and Adair Lummis collected more surveys in mid-April at the Archdeacons'/Deacon Directors' Conference at the Gray Center in the Diocese of Mississippi. By the end of June, 31 leaders had responded, representing 30 dioceses (Although forty-eight dioceses were on

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General Convention, Denver, Colorado; and *the Consultation on the Diaconate; The Next Steps in the Re-Examination of the Diaconate in the Life of the Episcopal Church* (1980); and *Raising Up Servant Ministry: Eight Dioceses Work Toward the Future of the Diaconate and the Enablement of Servant Ministry* (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Networks used by leaders of Episcopal educational and formational groups is of major interest to Bud Holland, Wally Fletcher, and others on PEALL; questions on which have also been included in several other surveys in 2007-2008.

the list for this conference, several of those without active diaconal programs did not feel ready to complete a survey.)<sup>3</sup>

Of those responding to the survey, 71% are deacons, 21% priests, and the remainder mainly lay professionals. Each has major responsibility either for the diaconal formation program/school or for coordinating deacons in the diocese. Although 45% are paid at least part-time for their work in developing/directing diaconal formation/school programs in their dioceses, very few are paid full-time, and 44% fully donate their time.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF DIACONAL SCHOOLS/FORMATION PROGRAMS**

### **Types of Schools/Programs Twenty-five Years Ago**

Twenty-five years ago most dioceses ordaining deacons had moved away from “the old one-to-one tutorial method of educating deacons” and toward developing diaconal formation programs for several diaconal aspirants at a time. These programs were quite diverse. Some dioceses incorporated a few seminary courses in their programs, or EfM (Sewanee’s TEE then), or used a diaconal training program of another denomination, particularly Roman Catholic. Some dioceses were “running their own diaconal training schools with prescribed courses and a regular academic year.” Several of the larger schools for deacons were also open to students interested in a variety of lay ministries and the nonstipendiary priesthood. These larger (and more expensive) diocesan schools were more highly rated by diaconal students in 1984, because these had “more course offerings and other curricular components especially designed for diaconate students,” including “colleague and spiritual growth groups, and special field work experiences.”<sup>4</sup>

It was apparent in the mid-eighties, however, that “not all dioceses can maintain schools for deacons in the sense indicated (in the quote) above.” Diocesan resources to fund diaconal programs diverged widely, as did the geographical dispersion of diaconal aspirants and postulants within a diocese. Particularly in dioceses with far-flung

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<sup>3</sup> . Any responses that came in later are not reflected in the Appendix, but will be saved for reference. The Appendix should accompany this report

<sup>4</sup> *Consultation on the Diaconate* (1980), p. 11.

congregations and limited resources, diaconal students typically studied alone most of the time, following a somewhat common syllabus of topics. Some also took appropriate courses in higher educational institutions near them, and either met with other diaconal students in small groups within regions, and/or got together with other diaconal students once to a few times a year.<sup>5</sup>

### **Diaconal Schools and Formation Programs in 2008**

Based on the surveys received in 2008 similar differences among diocesan programs/schools exist today. Although the areas of education and skills needed for diaconal ordination are set (Title III, Canon 6); as was true thirty years ago, dioceses decide the amount of emphasis to give each area and how best to prepare students for area competency. In illustration, in 2008 there are:

- Diocesan schools in operation for over a decade that have a fine-tuned core curriculum of the five requisite areas of competence for diaconal ordination, usually including both required and/or elective courses, collegial sharing and spiritual formation groups, supervised practical training and field experience.
- In contrast, there are dioceses that have no program/school of their own presently, and send any diaconal aspirants to programs of adjacent Episcopal dioceses or those of other denominations, or to nearby seminaries for needed academic and experiential education. This means that postulants within one diocese may be preparing in different programs/locations for ordination.

Between these extremes, there are a number of variations in how dioceses meet the canonical educational and training requirements for deacons in 2008. The following account of how different aspects of diaconal formation are handled across dioceses, explores some of these variations.

### **Longevity of School, Total Graduates, Current Students - Diaconal & Other**

Nearly half (47%) of those responding to the survey, indicated their school/program for deacons had been in existence for at least ten years (2 saying their diocese has run the program/school for over 35 years.) There were a few responding from dioceses without any diaconal formation programs/school in operation during 2007-2008. One reported that the diocesan school had been closed for about a decade, but was

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<sup>5</sup> *Raising up Servant Ministry* (1985), pp 49-50.

expected to reopen soon. Several others wrote that their dioceses would start or at least begin planning a diaconal formation program for the first time in the fall of 2008. Still others mentioned that recently their school had undergone substantial changes under new leadership.

The number of graduates ever ordained from these diaconal schools/programs similarly varied from none (18%) to over 35 graduates now ordained (21%). The current enrollment in these diocesan formation programs is relatively modest – typically under ten in total. Generally, the longer the schools have been in existence, the greater their number of current students as well as the more graduates in total, but there is no relationship with their number of graduates in the last five years.<sup>6</sup> This difference is likely because over a long span of years, dioceses and diaconal schools build up reputations and a cadre of graduates, but within a shorter, recent time span may have changed recruitment, curricular foci, and resource priorities which impact the number of graduates positively or negatively.

The thirty dioceses returning surveys were nearly divided in whether their schools were open to students who “aspire to lay or ordained ministry other than the diaconate.” This division, however, had no significant relationship to how long the school has been in existence, nor number of current students, nor the total number of their graduates now deacons. There are many curricular variations across schools enrolling both diaconal and other students. In illustration, in some diocesan schools there are only a couple of non-diaconal students; in other schools the diaconal and lay ministry students may have most of the same courses in the beginning months or year of their programs before dividing into separate “tracks.”

Those diocesan schools offering deacons continuing education courses are predominantly those that also offer continuing education to priests and lay professionals.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix, page 2., Table E “Graduates and Present Enrollment by School Years in Operation.”

## Course Credits and Area Completions Needed for Graduation

Required and elective courses: In almost all (97%) of these diocesan programs, diaconal students need to take at least *some* required courses to graduate. At over half the schools (55%), diaconal students may take elective courses at either their diocesan school (9 diocesan respondents) or at a school of another Episcopal diocese or denomination (12 respondents).<sup>7</sup>

Life experiences: Nearly half of the schools (48%) ask that before graduation students assemble a portfolio indicating life experiences. Requiring students to ready a portfolio of their life and learning experiences to meet graduation requirements does not mean these portfolios are accepted for graduation credit. Presently, 57% do not accept life experiences as academic/area credit at all, though life experience portfolios may be required as part of discernment process. Some schools accept credit for life experience in the form mainly of past learning experiences – sometime for ministerial practice units and more typically for waiving the requirement for a particular (required) course and letting the student substitute another course for graduation credit. A fourth (25%) of the schools do give credit for life experience, at least if the student “gives proof of study or training acquired,” which may be met by writing a paper on the value of the life experience for diaconal ministry, which must be approved by the director or a panel. One school allows up to 15 course credits for documented life experience, especially for students without prior college degrees, although this is not typical. Schools that allow more course options for completing area/credit requirements are also more likely to allow life experiences to count toward graduation units, while schools with mainly a required curriculum and no electives are very unlikely to permit students’ life experiences to be used as part of the total course or area credit needed for graduation.<sup>8</sup>

Clinical Pastoral Education is handled in varying ways among the schools responding, probably in large part because dioceses, as well as schools, differ in the requirements and resources for such education. Some dioceses require about the same

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<sup>7</sup> Five of these schools allow students to take electives either at their school or another.

<sup>8</sup> See Chart 1 in the Appendix, p. 4.

amount of CPE for the ordination of all headed for either the diaconate or the priesthood; some require CPE for all, but fewer units of CPE for deacons; some dioceses require CPE only for future deacons interested in becoming chaplains; and some dioceses do not require CPE for diaconal ordination at all - accepting or even preferring diaconal students undertake ministries in congregations or especially in community ministries.<sup>9</sup>

Somewhat over half (55%) say that their diocese does require CPE for diaconal ordination, whether or not the school does, while somewhat under two-fifths (38%) say their school requires CPE for graduation, even should the diocese not have CPE requirements for diaconal ordination. Whatever the CPE requirements or alternate ministerial practices used by either dioceses or schools, from comments written on the survey, there seem to be substantial experimentations in process on good sites and approaches for CPE training.

### **Innovative Programs and Best Practices**

When asked if there are “strong aspects of your diaconal program you would be willing to share” with those in other dioceses, two-thirds of survey respondents are very willing to share all or some particularly innovative aspects of their programs with other directors of diaconal programs. The remaining third simply do not have their program in operation yet or over a long enough time span to feel themselves ready share aspects of what they hope will be a good program, e.g. “Prototype model not yet tried.”

In addition to CPE and ministry experiences, several have devised special seminars or workshops on topics such as “discernment: exploring your ministry,” “priest/deacon relationships,” “triangulation and boundaries,” and “developing diaconal congregations.” Others have devised innovative curricular practices, such as: group meetings and weekends over the years, and one has “congregational companions” who go through the program with their assigned diaconal student, reading the same books and attending classes.

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<sup>9</sup> More detail about the CPE requirements for deacons of dioceses and schools can be found in the Appendix, pp. 4-5.



## **Resources and Networks for Developing Diaconal Formation Programs**

Current Resources and Networks: One of the top ways that directors and archdeacons receive valuable input for diaconal formation programs is through sharing ideas with directors and archdeacons in other dioceses. Over half (54%) indicated that in strengthening their programs during the last year, “leaders of diaconal programs elsewhere” were *quite-to-very* helpful. Other networks found to be that helpful by half or more of those responding are: their bishop or diocesan staff, rectors in their dioceses (but not pastors of other denominations in the area<sup>10</sup>), and the North American Association for the Diaconate. Several indicate that NAAD has been helpful in providing written materials, but particularly in enabling the development of communicative ties among diaconal program directors, which might otherwise not exist. Although about half also found their own diocesan school faculty quite/very helpful in strengthening their current diaconal formation program, only about a fifth said this about seminary or university faculty in the area. No one responding found the “Episcopal Church Center resources or websites” quite/very helpful in the last year, although two-fifths reported receiving “some” useful ideas for their diaconal programs from the Church Center.

Forthcoming Information About Diaconal Formation Programs: A couple of months after this diaconal school survey was sent, in July 2008 also under the jurisdiction of the North American Association for the Diaconate and PEALL, a web survey of deacons was launched. Eventual results of deacons’ responses to questions about specifics of their diaconal programs and how well their programs prepared them for fulfilling each of their five ordination charges, will provide other grounded ideas for strengthening diaconal programs generally and in particular dioceses<sup>11</sup>.

Nearly three-fourths (73%) of these deans/directors surveyed said that they do have fairly complete lists of their graduates ordained to the diaconate in the last five years. These diaconal schools may already have been or will be helpful in ensuring that

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<sup>10</sup> This is mainly because over three-fifths did not ask pastors of ELCA or other denominations in the area.

<sup>11</sup> Dioceses in which 10 or more survey responses from deacons are received, will get their diocesan percentage distribution of how their deacons responded compared to the total responses from deacons.

their graduates get access to this ongoing web survey of deacons. Further, fully four-fifths of these directors/archdeacons said they would be willing to talk over the telephone about aspects of their diaconal programs; a number of whom will likely be interviewed after results from the deacons' survey are obtained.

## **DIACONAL FORMATION PROGRAM LEADERS' RECOMMENDATIONS**

A number of these leaders, based on their considerable experience with diaconal formation programs, have suggestions now for the Episcopal Church on how to strengthen recruitment and education for the diaconate.<sup>12</sup>

In recruitment to the diaconal formation programs, good publicity in church and secular press about deacons is important, as several noted. In publicizing the value of diaconal ordination, there are some differences across dioceses in whether it best to recruit specifically for diaconal orders or recruit for all orders at once, and let the discernment process do the sorting. Attracting younger people to the diaconate, particularly college students headed toward secular professional careers, is a highly desired recruitment outcome.

In education for the diaconate, dioceses with a visible number of active deacons and a burgeoning school for diaconal formation, have a publicity advantage in recruitment over dioceses which have few deacons or are just starting/restarting their formation programs. The format of courses offered - even in small or new schools/programs - may serve to attract youth or others liking or needing flexibility in undertaking diaconal formation. On-line courses were named by two as such attractions in enrollment in diaconal programs. Courses in Spanish will be needed in some dioceses in order to expand the value of the diaconate and numbers of deacons. Others suggested modules and workshops offered over weekends six or more times years, or finding more precise, acceptable methods of assessing how life competencies can be used to meet educational requirements for diaconal ordination. Whatever sources of credit/area fulfillment are used, most would agree that those intending to be deacons should

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<sup>12</sup> For all comments made, see Appendix pp. 9-10.

incorporate specific diaconal formation into their education programs, or as one warned they risk in their diocese:

- *This program has failed as a training program for deacons:* the (few) students who graduate from it have no formation or preparation to become deacons and half have not been able to sustain their diaconal vocation. Their theological education has been excellent, but their training to the life and vocation of a deacon has been non-existent. I am convinced that diaconal formation itself must be the centerpiece of any diaconal program.

For effective recruitment, education, and deployment of deacons, it is crucial several aver, that Episcopal leaders on the diocesan and national levels understand the distinctive ministries that deacons can accomplish for the benefit of the total Church. All too often, bishops, priests and lay COM and Standing Committee members do not understand the distinctive role of servant ministry and deacons in connecting the world and the Church. Further, the better the diocesan bishop understands how deacons and priests differ in their core ministries, as one pointed out, the more effectively the COM and the school can work together in setting educational and formation standards for ordination to the diaconate. Perhaps an attraction for some to the diaconate is that it is “counter-cultural,” as one put it, compared to other vocations and ministries. However, this also means that deacons need to be “supported in their diaconal ministry by a community of deacons and a bishop who values their ministry.”

Support of the diaconate entails recognition of the value of diaconal ministries on the national level as well. One reason that diaconal formation/school directors do not find Church Center resources and websites particularly valuable for strengthening their diocesan programs may be that the Church Center does not understand deacons’ distinctive ministries and seek their advice and participation either. Perhaps networking with the Church Center would improve, as another wrote, **if** “the Episcopal Church Center looks to deacons for help with the Millennium Development Goals, poverty and hunger issues, advocacy, and other areas that are diaconal.

**POSTSCRIPT:**

It is no small thing that this research has been conducted. It is also remarkable that it has taken 30 years to ask questions of the larger church that might have been asked all along. So we are especially grateful to our many colleagues on the Proclaiming Education for All (PEALL) task force, for encouraging this important study on the formation and vocational development of deacons. PEALL was charged with looking at theological education and Christian formation in a comprehensive way and, indeed, the diaconate was included and represented every step of the way.

We are grateful too, to those who responded to this survey. While it was our hope that more formation directors would share with us, we feel that this important study has identified many of the trends and issues that we observe as an Association. Since 1996, NAAD has sponsored annual gatherings of formation directors and deacon archdeacons in order to exchange information and resources. Programs have been strengthened, resources created, and relationships forged across dioceses with diverse gifts and needs, but with the same goal in mind.

We have learned that our diaconal formation programs can serve as a model of effective formation in local contexts while encouraging the exchange of best practices and problem-solving throughout the larger church. Indeed diaconal formation programs have always been local, and we believe the church has benefited from that.

This study will be complemented by a much larger one in which about 780 deacons shared information about their vocational development and lifelong learning. In the meantime, we're pleased to be able to share this information.

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