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Growing in Ministry:  
Formation for  
Diaconal Service

by

Louise Williams



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North American Association for the Diaconate  
271 North Main Street  
Providence, RI 02903

# Growing in Ministry: Formation for Diaconal Service

by Louise Williams

*Louise Williams is a deaconess, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Executive Director of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, Valparaiso, IN, and President of DIAKONIA World Federation of Diaconal Associations. This is a revised version of a keynote address given at the National Diaconate Dialogue Group Consultation in Rochester, New York, April 26-28, 1991.*

## Introduction

In this paper I hope to call to the surface some things that you already know—to paint some pictures, to ask some questions, to invite some reflections and sharing. and to prime the pump for a dialogue that will continue among deacons and all ministers. I realize that it is a little risky to do this, but I would encourage you, as you read, to let your minds wander and to let your imaginations go, to allow yourself to see real people and concrete situations where diakonia happens. I would encourage you to think specifically about your own ministry and the ministries of others whom you know. Visualize those people and those places of service and see what fits with that picture and what doesn't.

## I. Pictures of Diakonia

More and more I know that the picture of diakonia must include many parts. But it is not a neat, well-integrated picture where all the pieces interlock like a jigsaw puzzle. It must rather be a sort of collage with some of the pieces having blurred or jagged edges. Some of the pieces have paradoxical flip sides, and some overlap with others. And the picture isn't ever finished. Take a look with me.

“Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ And they said to him, ‘Rabbi, where do you live?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’” *John 1:38,39*

“And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.’” *Matthew 11:4,5*

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?’” *Matthew 25:37-9*

In our community we pray in our “Deaconess Litany”: Jesus, Friend of sinners, Companion of the outcast, Associate of the needy, enlighten our eyes to see you in our needy neighbor.

Diakonia, our service, is always both a means of encountering Christ and a result of that encounter. Come and see.

### **A. Washing Feet**

It is hard to find a more vivid picture of servanthood than washing feet. You know the story well from John 13. We can picture Jesus taking a towel and basin of water and washing the disciples feet and so showing us how we are to serve one another. Perhaps it is because we don't wash feet much in our culture, or perhaps it is because we don't have slaves to do that sort of work, or perhaps it is because we don't really understand what is happening that we can so quickly romanticize this classic picture of servanthood.

This is humble, slavely service on bended knee. It requires girding ourselves, getting out of the way whatever would encumber us. It requires giving up our status to touch what we would perhaps rather not touch—the dusty, smelly, blistered, “becorned” parts of humanity. It is awkward work—hard on the knees and the back. It puts one in a vulnerable position. When you are there on bended knee, someone could easily kick you, and you can't easily or quickly run away when you are on your knees. It is personal, almost intimate. It is a service that is responsive to and shaped by a very personal need.

But what makes the picture of John 13 stand out in such bold relief is, of course, that it is Jesus, the one called “Lord and Master,” who washes feet. It is almost as if we see a motion picture here of Philippians 2—the Christ who had the option of equality with God did not hold on to it, clutch it or hoard it, but emptied it out, taking on the form of a servant.

It is a delicate matter to talk about servanthood with anyone who has been oppressed or abused or undervalued—with anyone who has low self-esteem—with anyone who has been relegated to a servant role not of their own choosing. And these are difficult words for anyone who wants so much to be somebody, to somehow stand out from the crowd, to do just one significant thing, to distinguish themselves in some way even if it is to be the best servant. But the foot-washing picture of diakonia invites us to another view—to a self-emptying perspective—knowing that we have a self to offer—trusting that we can give up our illusions about ourselves—being freed from a spirit of competition and the resulting fear of not measuring up, being freed from the necessity of protecting our status by keeping those below us in their place.

The one who became in every way like us invites us to get close enough to other people to see how much like them we are—formed from the same earth and having the same breath of God breathed in us. It is from the footwashing, knee-bending stance that we can begin to experience what it is like to be with the poor, the outcast, undervalued, unappreciated, the least of these who are the special concern for diakonia.

The foot-washing picture is like one of the pictures that keeps changing. I can't always tell who is who.

“Who is the servant, bending low, washing tired feet, acting out a heart of love?  
And who receives the tender, loving massage, the warm, gentle wash?”

Sometimes it's Christ—sometimes it's me—sometimes it is still another."

## **B. Waiting Tables**

Anyone who has studied Greek has learned somewhere along the way that diakonia has its root meaning in waiting tables.

To be a good table server is to be attentive to another's need. It is often to wait for the sign and signal that service is required or desired. It is to learn the fine art of being available while not interfering. It involves being helpful but invisible. It means being courteous.

To be involved in waiting table is to respond to a basic need. It is to give the very nourishment needed for life. It is to offer food—needed by both the served and server.

For the Greeks, diakonia, waiting at table, meant also tasting, sampling the food and drink. This reminds me that the diakonia I know *is* tasting. Jesus Christ tasted my food and drink, and I taste the lot of those I seek to serve. I may not consume the whole meal, but in my serving, I do have opportunity to learn what their world is like, to hear their stories, to feel their pain, to celebrate their joys, to sense the bitterness of what has poisoned them, to join them from time to time in tasting the goodness of the God who nourishes us all.

Diakonia, in the Greek, could also mean catering the feast. That, I think, is a wonderful picture of diakonia. To serve at the celebration is still to care for the nourishment of the guests, to taste with them, to be attentive to each individual need. But I also see in this image a care for the whole—a shepherding role, if you will—that notices not just the individual need, but has a sense of how it fits together—that cares that every single person has a good time and has enough to eat and drink.

## **C. Working for Change**

According to Bernard Cooke: "Christian service to 'the poor' has historically been directed primarily to helping the needy within the church. What is somewhat new in our present-day context is the added emphasis on Christian responsibility for the whole human situation. What is even newer is the shift in (human) kind's social patterns and social attitudes, a shift that has made 'service' a complex international endeavor to achieve justice and dignity and equality for all men and women." (*Ministry to Word and Sacrament*, p 390)

So the foot-washing and table-waiting pictures must be augmented in this age with a bigger picture, one that is a bit harder to visualize. It is not just caring for the intimate needs of the individual. It is not just having a concern for everyone at the table. It is somehow to reclaim the role assigned to humanity in creation, to be caretaker of the whole creation. It is catching the vision of the new creation and working toward making that vision more and more visible. This means that diakonia will be concerned with prevention, that it will be concerned with the structural and political dimensions of a problem, that it will be committed to reshape institutions of society. One doing this type of service may indeed rattle cages and challenge the status quo. It is the kind of diakonia that says, "Let the servant church arise!"—get off it's knees, stretch and reach on the tips of its toes—to do all that we can do, "so that the (Reign) of God which is still

to come in its fullness can be" in the present at least a foretaste of the feast to come. (*World Council of Churches, Statement on Diakonia, 1982*)

## **II. What is the Call to this Ministry?**

If these are the pictures of diaconal ministry, it is clear that it is a ministry that belongs to the whole people of God. Every Christian is called to wash feet, wait tables, and work for change. What does it mean then to be called not just to diakonia but to the diaconate? What does it mean, as it were, to go public with this ministry? What, if anything, distinguishes the call to diaconate from the call to ministry of the whole people of God? And what, if anything, distinguishes the call to diaconate from the call to presbyterate—the call to be pastor or priest? For some of us, the institutional or structural answers may be somewhat easy, but the essential answer may be more difficult.

We may long for the simpler days when Jesus walked by the seashore and called disciples who could answer on the spot and respond with their feet. Or we may long for the small, simpler community of faith in the early church where people knew each other's gifts and called them forth in response to needs.

In our organization we struggle with the word recruitment. I don't think we recruit for ministry. That's the activity of the spirit. Our job is to let people know about the option of diaconate and then to help them discern whether their call is indeed to this ministry. That process of discernment is a mysterious interplay between the person's inner sense of call, the individual's own gifts and abilities, and the needs of the church and world. When any one of those components is lacking the call is not complete. If we are to assist in the discernment process, we must know what the call to diaconate sounds like; what the gifts, the charisms, that are required for this ministry; and what it is that the church and world need from this ministry.

If you are at all like me. when you think of your own call—way back then when it started, and now today—perhaps you, like me, have a sense of the spirit hovering over mixed motives and inadequate understandings; perhaps you. like me, have a sense of the spirit blowing through the circumstances of life to put people in the right place at the right time; and perhaps you, like me, have a sense of the spirit warming the hearts of those who made decisions about certification, consecration. and placement.

As we try to talk about call, I think we will find, as we often do when we try to talk about mysteries, that the words can't quite handle the topic.

*I would invite you to take a few moments to reflect on those three pictures of diakonia—washing feet, waiting tables, and working for change. Then I invite you to think of your own call—your sense when you first got wind of it, and your sense of call now. Then I invite you to take a few minutes to talk with your neighbor about those things.*

## **III. Tools for Diakonia**

Our resources for diakonia begin with the fact that we are people who have been served. The servant Christ has washed our feet. Our God has served up for us a sumptuous feast and nourishes us with all that we need for life. Our God has worked for and effected change in us, making us new creations and showing us a vision of what life was meant to be and entrusting us once again with the joyous, if sometimes

difficult, task of sharing that newness with others. For that work, we have special tools.

### **A. Towel tools**

The first set of tools are like the towel used for foot-washing. They are soft, pliable, taking shape around the need of the one served. They are the tools one must have to do the knee-bending, table waiting service. But they are also necessary for the ‘on our toes.’ working-for-chance diakonia, too. They are tools some people find hard to use because they are so shapeless. Walter Brueggeman says they are not like the carpenter tools Jesus must have used in the shop—hammers, vises, chisels, saws—tools you can do something with, tools you can use to hold something in place to change its shape so that it fits better. This first set of tools is made up of care, compassion and hospitality.

#### **1. Care**

From Henri Nouwen I have learned that the root of the word “care” is in the Gothic “Kara” which means lament. To care is “to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with.” (*Out of Solitude*, p. 34.) Care is to be contrasted with cure which is focused on taking the pain away. Our preoccupation with cure can cause us to separate ourselves especially from those whose lot we cannot improve—the aged, the severely disabled, the obnoxious persons whose personalities seem to grate on us, those suffering from Alzheimers disease, those caught in the hopeless entangled web of poverty and unemployment, the dying. In part, because we want to cure, we want to escape those people and go to work where we can be more successful, more cost effective. But diakonia calls us back to those in need. To care is to know that finally we do not have the power to cure. What we do have is the power of presence—ours and Christ’s, the self-emptying one who gave up equality with God to come close to us, to be present with us, to suffer with us.

#### **2. Compassion**

As you know, our word compassion also means to suffer with. In Hebrew *Recham* and *rechemin*, compassion and womb, are closely related. Compassion is womb love, mother’s love. It is the kind of “suffering with” that comes from knowing that that other person is related to me, born of me, part of me, like me. It is the suffering that will not give up until that other person grows into the fullness of life that I know can be there. It is the kind of love that knows that nothing in that other person is alien to me. It is the kind of diakonia that knows—taking the clue from the need of the other—when to hold and embrace and when to let go. Compassion knows that I am one with that other person, and compassion will keep loving and trying until that other person knows it, too. Compassion is the “towel tool” that will cause us to seek the lost, to love the lonely, and never give up on any of the “least of these.” That after all is what our compassionate God has done for us.

#### **3. Hospitality**

Hospitality, like care and compassion, is a responsive tool. To be hospitable is to make an open space so that the other person can come in. Hospitality does not demand that others become as we are but gives them room to be who they are. Hospitality means welcoming that other one even while still a stranger. That, of course, is risky. But the stranger will only know the fullness of hospitable love when taken in as stranger. We will only open ourselves to the possibility of entertaining angels unaware, or of meeting the risen Christ when we open our home to the *stranger*, when we invite the

*stranger* to break bread with us.

Hospitality may mean literally opening our home to strangers. It may mean that we view our parishes not just as places for us but as places to welcome those who are really strange to us. It may mean welcoming the stranger into the space of our awareness and concern. Hospitality may also find expression in our lives as a hospitality of heart. This may mean taking care how we talk in private of the stranger. It means putting aside our judgmental attitudes and words about those who are different from us—attitudes and words we too readily express in the privacy of our own homes or in those places where we feel at home because others agree with us. Hospitality, finally, includes welcoming the stranger and the strange into our time. Jose Hobday, a Franciscan and a native American, reminds us that hospitality “asks that we put aside for a while whatever we thought necessary and work with what has come.” (“To Serve and Not to be Served: The Church as Servant in Our Time.” *Ministering in a Servant Church*, p. 11)

Again, we know that we can risk welcoming the stranger as stranger because the God of all creation has welcomed us in all our differentness and separation, loving us while we were yet sinners. Care and Compassion are towel tools that allow us to get close to the one in need by emptying ourselves and by realizing the connection, by knowing that nothing human is alien to us. Hospitality allows us to wrap our towel around what is strange and know that our unity with the neighbor is not based on intimate interpersonal knowledge but is rooted in the common humanity that we share and in the life of God that has breathed into all whom God created.

“We cannot truly care,” says Jose Hobday, “and reach out in compassion if we have not felt need ourselves.” (p. 11) And perhaps we cannot really be hospitable unless we know that we are also strangers in need of being taken in. Part of our preparation for diakonia, for caring, compassion and hospitality, is to face those parts of ourselves in which we feel pain and want and where we feel left out. And so we discover a paradoxical tool—our own need. Like the widow Jesus praised, we can explore how to give out of our want—out of our dusty feet, our hungers, our strangeness. As we open ourselves to our own needs, we become more open to the needs of others, and we will find that our world is expanded and illumined.

## **B. Action Tools**

Seeing Christ in our neighbor, in our care, compassion and hospitality, contribute to the vision that moves us to work for change. The second set of tools may seem more like the “hammer, chisel, vise and saw” I mentioned before. I call them power, planning and professionalism. These tools are not so much used on the people in need as they are used in changing structures and influencing institutions.

Perhaps you know the story of the little boy who was watching a sculptor at work, chipping away at the huge block of marble. When the work was finished, the little boy asked the artist, “How did you know there was a lion in there?” We have seen the vision. We know there is a lion in there. We have tasted the fullness of life God wills for us all. And we use the tools at hand to chip away so that others can see too what we know is inside.

### **1. Power**

The first tool in our second kit is power and influence. Perhaps because we, diaconal types, are so sensitive to the abuse of power, we often seem not to realize the power we do have. It is common in our world for people to feel powerless, to feel that nothing they do can impact the big wide world and all the problems that are there. The tendency then is to deal only with, “my little world”—to prize highly my life, my family, my job, my little corner of the church, without looking very far beyond. In that smaller world we can so easily confuse power with control, and we invest ourselves in manipulating our little world and the people in it—we can so easily become people who lord power over others.

The power that is the tool of the diaconate is the power that comes from the strength within, from knowing who we are and what we are about, from trusting that holy breath of God breathed in us, from knowing that our role is not to control but to empower, not to manipulate but to liberate. We need to learn to be at home with our power—that which we have individually and that which we have when joined with others. It is a power that is not ours in the sense that we can possess it, hoard it, protect it; rather it is God’s power in us. This power is a diaconal tool which, when we learn to use it wisely and share it generously, can chisel away at the block of stone to find the lion we know is inside.

## **2. Planning**

The second tool in this set is planning. It goes without saying that the larger the system or structure we seek to address, the more we need to plan. Planning, of course, comes more naturally to some people than to others. On one side of the coin, lack of planning can always leave a person a victim of circumstances and feeling powerless. On the other side, planning can also be restrictive and even oppressive when all that one lives for is the goal, the bottom line, without leaving openness to God’s surprises.

The kind of planning that is a diaconal tool takes time—often a precious commodity for those in ministry. It takes tremendous sensitivity to the experiences of all the people involved in the process and affected by it. It takes grounding in the Scriptures and the best wisdom of the Christian community throughout the ages. And it takes great faith—that, on the one hand, what we do does make a difference in inviting the whole world to participate more fully in God’s shalom, but it takes great faith—that, on the other hand, it is finally not what we plan nor what we do that ushers in the Reign of God—rather it is God’s activity, taking what we offer—our meager loaves and fishes, as it were—taking that, blessing that, and miraculously transforming that into something that can feed a multitude.

## **3. Professionalism**

Professionalism, the next tool, has many definitions. It can mean to be paid to do something that other people, amateurs, do for free, for the love of it. It can mean to have mastered a certain body of knowledge or set of skills. It can mean to be licensed or certified to do certain things that others are not permitted to do—at least not permitted to do for pay. All of our groups wrestle with questions related to our professionalism, and we come to a variety of conclusions.

At its worst, professionalism can become an end instead of a means, a product instead of a tool. It can emphasize distinctions between people. It can build walls and

create. or emphasize, distance between one group of people and another.

The kind of professionalism that is the tool for diakonia, comes from the root meaning of the word—to confess what we know and believe, to declare openly before others. To be professional is to go public, if you will. It is to confess that the Servant Christ calls us all, without distinction, to wash feet, wait tables and work for change. To be a professional deacon is to be a living symbol of that. It is sometimes to do diakonia in the name of and for the sake of the whole church. It is also to enable, organize and mobilize others to do the diakonia which is essential in the life of the church—to see the needs, to call forth the gifts, to empower and encourage people, without distinction, to do their diaconal service. And it is also to be a sign, a living reminder, an icon if you will, of the servant Christ who calls the whole people of God to a life of diakonia.

### **C. Spiritual Tools**

The final set of tools which I would ask you to add to the collage is made up of community, time and sabbath.

#### **1. Community**

Thank God we are not servants alone. The needs are so great and we are so small. We are a *community* of servants. Together, as the Body of Christ, we take servant shape around the needs and hopes of the world. Together we hear the call to a life shaped by diakonia. Together we struggle with what it means to follow the one who came not to be served but to serve. Together we encourage and support one another in our diakonia. Together we celebrate the stories of meeting Christ in those people we seek to serve. Together we pray—for those we serve, for ourselves, and for each other.

To be community is not easy. Parker Palmer says that community is that place where the person we least want to live with always lives. For some of us our personalities pull us away from community. And all of us feel the tugs of North American rugged individualism and independence. There are days when each of us would willingly walk away from those who would be community around us so that we do not have to deal with them, with their differences, with our conflicts.

But our call to diaconate, while it is personal, that is, addressed to the person we are, is not private. It sets us into the midst of a community, of a people who are the church, of the people who are the diaconate. It is only in community that we can begin to discover what it means to live in the forgiveness of sins. It is only in community that we can begin to understand the mutuality that is at the heart of our ministry. It is only in community that we can begin to have our eyes opened and our touch sensitized to recognize and receive the risen Christ in the most unlikely places—even, or perhaps most especially, in the person we least want to live with.

#### **2. Time**

Time is a tool, but we often have ambivalent feelings about time. So often we feel we have no time—or at least not nearly enough of it. In time we face our creaturliness, unlike God, we are bound by the limits of time. In time, we also face our brokenness—our unwillingness and inability to live with our limits. But we have been given the gift of time—all the time that is necessary in one sense. Listen again to Jose Hobday, and picture time as a tool for diakonia

Serving includes an understand of time; it is what the “graced moments” of living are all about. It is in time, time alone and with each other. that we have the opportunity to elicit and provoke the awareness of God’s presence, of God with us. It is in an appreciation of time, and a freedom from its restrictions as well as obedience to its preciousness, that we have some of our finest chances for service. Moments of birth and death, of joy and pain, of wonder and dismay are celebrated in time.... There is a kind of Gospel urgency about working while we have the light and the time, recognizing the acceptable moment.... Serving others has much to do with the way we journey in time, what time means to us, which are times for courageous response and which are times for nurturing in stillness.... How we play and pray, work and wait are all connected. (pp. 2-3)

### **3. Sabbath**

Our view of time is closely related to the final tool in this set—sabbath or rest. Sabbath reminds us that true serving is to know when to move away, to say good bye, to be absent, to rest, to pray. The purpose of our diakonia is not just to be present with another in suffering, it is not just to work for a more humane world, it is not just to alleviate pain. The purpose of our diakonia is also to catch people into the movement toward the Christ life. That fullness of life is like the life pictured in Genesis 1 where the sabbath is the culmination and capstone of all creation. Rest and worship are very closely linked in sabbath. And the interplay between sabbath and service is part of the rhythm of God’s created world. That rhythm is important because it is a reminder to us always that we are servant of God, but we are not God. We are not finally the ones in charge of the cosmos. We dare not think we are God, nor must we allow ourselves to become “God” to our neighbor. Rather we must make space in our lives to stop the work, to rest, to pray, to, as Shug says to Celie in *The Color Purple*, “just lay back and just admire stuff.” (p. 176)

There may be other tools in your diaconal tool box. Our task is to get to know our tools. We are not all equally adept at using them all, but all are needed. We may sometimes need to learn to use some of them like an apprentice from others who have more experience or talent. Sometimes we may need to hand the tools over to someone else who can do the work better. But mostly we need to learn to value all the tools and to learn when and how to use each one.

### **IV. How is One Prepared For this Ministry?**

If these are tools for diakonia, what are the means and processes through which a person develops competency with the tools? Some of the tools are related to skills that can be taught, and some of the competencies can be measured. But others are attitudes of the heart and of the spirit. How does one learn care, compassion, hospitality? How does one gain competency in community? How does one learn about the rhythms of time and of service and sabbath? Can these things be taught and learned in an academic setting?

Or are other “schools” of learning more appropriate?

How much academic, head-knowledge is needed? Is it necessary for one whose

ministry is, for example, spiritual care of Alzheimer's patients, to know the intricacies of Old Testament scholarship. Is there one standard for all, or are there variations for differing types of ministries?

If we want to chip away at the hierarchical understandings of ministry and bring out the lion of a more mutual ministry, what kind of credentials do we need to stand toe-to-toe with those in the so called "higher ministries"? And what are the dangers of having special knowledge that seems to set diaconate above others in the church?

Sometimes our deaconess students have accused us of having a mold that we try to fit every one of them in so that they come out like ceramic pieces—maybe with a few variations of color and glaze, but basically shaped the same. I hope that that is not what our education/formation process is about, for that is entirely inappropriate.

I have thought that a more appropriate image is of a potter's wheel. Beginning with clay of different texture and size, touching and shaping the vessel so that they all come out as bowls, but with all different sizes and shapes, and suited for different uses.

But the more I think about it, I think I need an even different picture, and I am not sure what that picture is. I know that my formation for diaconal service was not ended when I was consecrated. My formation for ministry is an on-going process. My ministry is being shaped and reshaped by the things I learn, the people I meet, the service I give and receive. And somehow the ministry that diaconal workers today are part of must be cycled back not only into their own reformation, but also into the formation of those who are students and candidates—the diaconate yet to come. Maybe the best image is the one we use for recycling. For, pray God, that until the day I die, I will still be growing in ministry and being formed for diaconal service. And, pray God that what I am and what I do will help to shape those who are to come after—not to confine them but to give them a foundation on which to build

*I invite you to take a few moments to reflect on the tools for diakonia—the tools of care, compassion and hospitality; of power, planning, and professionalism; of community, time and sabbath. I invite you to think about your own preparation for using your diaconal tools. And then I invite you to talk briefly with your neighbor about those things.*

## **V. Resistances to Diakonia**

Recently *Parade* magazine (April 14, 1991) had as its cover story "When a Healer Needs Healing"—"Tens of thousands of America's clergy of all faiths find themselves burned out by the pressures of their calling—and the number is growing." If you read that article, you probably did not find it surprising. Most of us know in our own beings the truths expressed in that article, and for sure we know those truths in the lives of others we know who are in ministry. I think there are some things that make the pressures of the calling to diaconate especially problematic. For there are many resistances to diakonia—resistances inside ourselves, resistances in the church, and resistances from the larger culture. You know what many of those are. Let me list just a few.

### **A. Diakonia is counter cultural**

Diakonia just doesn't fit in our world. It is downwardly-mobile. It is not

achievement-oriented, and it is not, most often, cost-effective. It is focused on the “least of these.” It is oriented toward care rather than cure. It is time-consuming. We can’t even be sure we will be thanked. True diakonia has no strings attached and, for that reason, is a powerful sign of hope in a world that views things differently. Jurgen Moltmann says this:

The power of the (Reign of God) is to be found precisely where we participate as a church in the pattern of the cross of Christ, in which God gives us (Christ’s) honor and glory and comes into the midst of our suffering world to identify with those who are in need. The service to the sick, especially to those suffering from incurable diseases, is a kind of paradigm of the radical nature of Christian diakonia. For here we see how it is necessary for us to die daily, not hoping for the usual signs of success and worldly acclaim for our efforts, but out of love and the power of the Spirit to be willing to minister in what the world calls “hopeless situations.” Thus the Christian community in its diaconal ministry is precisely that sign of hope in a hopeless world which we profoundly believe God will use to accomplish (Christ’s) saving work among us today. (*Hope for the Church*, p. 36.)

We know well that it can be difficult to be counter-cultural, to be that kind of sign, to maintain that sense of hope.

## **B. The ambivalence of the church**

The church, it seems to me, isn’t always sure it wants diakonia either. That seems strange to me—as if somehow there weren’t enough work to be done, as if somehow there really could be too many servants. Almost every church body in the world is studying ministry. Such studies trigger people’s fear of change. They begin to realize that what was so clearly defined in their own minds before is perhaps not so clearly defined. And people begin to worry that somehow their role, their special place will be diminished or taken away if something new emerges. The diaconate is often seen as a threat to the (other) clergy or to the laity—as if there is only so much ministry to go around and what is given here must be taken away there.

And sometimes, it seems that the church wants “subservience” not servants. They prefer co-dependents, workaholics, and the like, rather than healthy people knowing their own power and their own limits. Diaconal workers are kept off balance with unclear expectations, limited financial and other resources, and double messages about the place of this ministry. People in the church may see the need for and even welcome foot-washers and table-waiters among the diaconate, but they may become nervous about feast-caterers and change-workers. They may celebrate the diaconate as a doer of the church’s diakonia, but they may be less comfortable with the diaconate as a reminder of their own call to diakonia or as a force to enable and empower that ministry in them all—laity, clergy, bureaucrat alike.

How strange that we who respond to the call to advocate for justice and equality for all, find ourselves so often within the church needing to advocate for justice and equality for ourselves and the ministry of which we are a part.

## **C. Resistances within Ourselves**

As much as we would like to place the primary responsibility for the stresses we feel

in our calling on the church and the world, perhaps the most profound resistances to diakonia are to be found within ourselves.

Nobody much wants to be a servant anymore. We don't want to be in that humble, vulnerable place. We'd rather be the one served. We look for all kinds of ways to get out of it. We're like the little girl who had two pieces of fudge. She wanted to share with her friend. She gave the friend the smaller piece. Her mother intervened and told her that when you share with someone, you give them the bigger piece. The little girl thought for a while. She then gave her friend both pieces of fudge and said, "Okay, now you share with me."

On the other hand, we don't really want to be served either. We don't want to be that vulnerable. We think we ought to be the great givers, not the receivers. We are embarrassed to need our feet washed. Being served forces us to look into our own heart.

But it is not just the serving we receive that causes us to face our own needs, to come to terms with our own heart. When we get close enough to our neighbor to, "suffer with," we also have to face our own pain, our own sin, and our own impending death. We shy away from diakonia because we don't want to face how much we are like our neighbor. In her book *The Strength of the Weak* Dorothee Soelle recounts the story of an old rabbi who asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?" one student asked. "No," said the rabbi. "Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?" "No," said the rabbi. "Then when is it?" the students asked. "It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us." (p. 41)

Sometimes we would rather stay in the dark. We'd rather not know. And if we do come to know, we often want not to care, we become accustomed to people's pain, to become apathetic. But in cutting ourselves off from other people, we also cut ourselves off from our own being, our own life, our own passion.

A final piece I'll add to the pictures of resistance to diakonia is the riskiness of it all. You can never tell where it might lead when we start to open ourselves to the suffering of others. To become involved in diakonia is to open ourselves not just to the pain of our neighbor; it is also to open ourselves to the leading of the spirit of Christ whom we meet there. And we all know how freely that Spirit blows where she wills.

## **VI. What kind of nurture/support is needed for this Ministry?**

If these are the kinds of pressures that the diaconate faces, what kinds of nurture/support are needed to sustain this ministry, to keep it alive and well? What are the things that will help to nurture and nourish the movement of the spirit in the lives and hearts of the members of the diaconate? How can we keep in touch with our spiritual center so that our ministry is not from our edges but flows from that which is deep inside us? How can we keep rooted in the midst of a world and sometimes a church that does not understand our calling and our style?

What are the things that are needed to build and nurture a sense of community?

What are the kinds of support that can help us to receive as well as give ministry? What can be done to clarify expectations about our roles and service? What can help us get beyond mere contracts, to covenants where we are valued not just for what we do but also for who we are?

What can the institutions and church staff do to help clarify and lead to broader understandings of ministry and to advocate for equitable distribution of resources for all kinds of ministries?

Surely we cannot look just to the people out there to provide for our support and nurture. We can also claim what is ours and what we have to give to each other as we come together. As our lives and ministries intersect—we can face and challenge the resistances to diakonia, we can be formed and reformed by each other as we use the tools we have, we can wash each others feet, wait on each others tables, and together work for change.

*I invite you to think about the resistances to diakonia—in the world, in the church, in yourself. I then invite you to think about those places and those ways in which you receive support and nurture. Then I invite you to talk with your neighbor about those things.*

## **Conclusion**

I invite you to look again at the three pictures of diakonia with which we began, but to look from a slightly different angle.

Perhaps it does not distort the picture too much to see in the basin of water used for foot-washing, also reflections of the waters of baptism. For me, at least, that is the source of my call. For it is in baptism that I am transformed from slave to free child and heir of all that God offers so that I can empty myself in service to others. It is in baptism that I can see who I am—not just who I am in and of myself, but one who has put on Christ so that, when I look at myself, I can see where Jesus lives. And when others look at me, miracle of miracles, they can see Christ in me when I serve them and they serve me. In baptism I am caught in the vision toward which we live—the vision that shows that death is not our final end. Death is only the penultimate word. The last word is Easter life—a life we can sometimes experience now as if it could be no fuller, and a life we still long for as “the more” which we know is still to come.

It is, I believe, because my life flows from those baptismal head waters that I can dare to face the need for change and work for it. Working for change is, it seems to me, closely related to repentance. It begins in facing my sin, my lack, my brokenness, my need for reconciliation. And somehow we do face that every time we encounter Christ in our neighbor. We feel it in so many ways in our own beings, in the church, in society. We know that we have not yet arrived, that we are still on the way, that we are still standing within this creation that is groaning as in travail waiting for the new birth. It is the transforming word of forgiveness that empowers me, that shapes me for ministry, that allows me to take the risk of putting myself into the picture, messy and hard though it may be. In the process of formation and reformation, sometimes I am the mother giving birth. Sometimes I am the midwife assisting. And sometimes I am the baby being born.

The new life needs to be celebrated and nurtured. That brings us again to the picture of waiting tables or catering the feast—not far from the picture of Communion, of Eucharist. Perhaps it is no accident that in the early centuries of the church the diaconate was very active when the community gathered to celebrate and be nurtured. They gathered the cares and concerns of the people and bid them in the prayer of the church. They received the offerings the people brought and from them they prepared the table for the meal. They assisted in the serving and then taking what remained to those who were ill or in prison and not able to gather.

In Holy Communion, in Eucharist we offer what we are and what we have into the hands of the God of love whose body is broken for us, so that the Loving One can break open the Body of Christ that we are, to be shared. Listen to Dom Helder Camera:

Am I mistaken, Lord,  
is it a temptation to think  
You increasingly urge me  
to go forth and proclaim  
the need and urgency  
of passing  
from the Blessed Sacrament  
to your other presence,  
just as real,  
in the Eucharist of the poor?

Theologians will argue,  
a thousand distinctions be advanced....  
But woe to the one who feeds on you,  
and later has no eyes to see You,  
to discern You,  
forging for food among the garbage,  
being evicted every other minute,  
living in sub-human conditions  
under the sign  
of utter insecurity.

*A Thousand Reasons for Living*, p. 255

In these Eucharists—both of them, the one we celebrate at the altar and the “Eucharist of the poor”—we have both the vision of the possibilities of the new age and the sight of the incompleteness of that vision in this age. We see both what will be and what we must do. We see where we are headed and how far we have to go. We see both the Christ who has come to be with us and the Christ who is still inadequately formed in us. What we see will begin to transform us, to break us open so that we can receive not only a Eucharistic vision but also the real flesh and blood of the Christ who comes to us in bread and wine and neighbor, to change us, to empower us, to liberate us, to encourage us to risk what we are compelled to do.

That kind of living will meet resistance—from the powers that are around us because such activity is subversive and threatens myths and assumptions and delicate balances of power; from the neighbors themselves because they may assume that we are like so many other “Christians” who have disappointed them in the past; and from within, ourselves because it will require dying, a giving up of our old self, of our old patterns of behaving, of our old pet sins. But all this comes as no surprise. Dying is always part of Eucharistic living—“As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show forth Christ’s death...” But dying is never the last word—“you show forth Christ’s death until Christ comes.” The last word is a word of hope in the Christ who comes to us and through us. And so we take the risk to come and see where Jesus lives—in our neighbor—and there to serve Christ with gladness—working for change, washing feet, waiting tables, but waiting as fast as we can.

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