

Lifelong Learning Is a Moral Imperative

Deacon John Willets, PhD

with appreciation and in thanksgiving for Deacon Phina Borgeson and Deacon Susanne Watson Epting, who share and critique important ideas about this and many, many other important ideas about Christ's Mission.

Seldom does an author so clearly state a thesis in the title, but this is the overriding assertion for the context and claim of this monograph. Let's consider some terms essential to our dialogue so that I continue to be clear as to how I use the important terms. Beginning with *moral imperative*, I mean by this term the following definition I borrowed from Wikipedia.

A moral imperative is a principle originating inside a person's mind that compels that person to act. It is a kind of categorical imperative, as defined by Immanuel Kant. Kant took the imperative to be a dictate of pure reason, in its practical aspect. Not following the moral law was seen to be self-defeating and thus contrary to reason. Later thinkers took the imperative to originate in conscience, as the divine voice speaking through the human spirit. The dictates of conscience are simply right and often resist further justification. Looked at another way, the experience of conscience is the basic experience of encountering the right.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_imperative

What is important here is to look at lifelong learning outside of simple choice. I will make the case for lifelong learning that makes it obligatory and fundamental to our Christian life. If I am a Christian, if I am called into Christ's mission, if I make promises that I will function as a member of the church and as a deacon loyal to my ordering to that office then I cannot escape the responsibility to be a lifelong learner because both my baptismal covenant and my ordination promises require my commitment to lifelong learning.

With respect to the term *lifelong learning*, I like the definition offered by The World Bank:

The latest knowledge and successful practices of planning and implementing education for lifelong learning suggest that lifelong learning is more than just education and training beyond formal schooling. A lifelong learning framework encompasses learning throughout the life cycle, from birth to grave and in different learning environments, formal, non-formal and informal.

http://www1.worldbank.org/education/lifelong_learning/overview.asp

A Christian Perspective

Let me now consider the moral system I use for this monograph that draws from the audience for which this paper is written and circulated. The North American Association **for** the Diaconate is an organization of Christian deacons. However, the paper has applicability across all order of the church including laos, deacons, priests, and bishops. It can be considered from both the individual perspective and the communal perspective.

Having led and participated in a number of workshops and conversations concerning lifelong learning, I come to the conclusion that an essay on the meaning of lifelong learning will be helpful to our discourse. Since we are an order of Christian deacons, when I lay the claim for my thesis that lifelong learning is a moral imperative, I use our Christian faith as the moral system on which I make the claim. The claim is not exclusive to this moral system, however. Although there are many references from the Christian scriptures I might chose, I base my claim of moral imperative on this pericope from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

I believe that I have considered the important words or terms on which I base my thesis that lifelong learning is a moral imperative taking into account the audience and speaking to the current needs of the church with respect to moving forward with the implementation of Title III of the Canons and to refine our dialogue in that process. Let me open the dialogue in this essay as we continue to think about lifelong learning and let me offer a few contexts in which the claim has meaning and importance for deacons as well as the church as well as the world in where we participate in Christ's mission, all orders, all the baptized, all organizational structures.

Title III, the canons on ministry formation and ordination

Deacons have considered issues of lifelong learning with respect to our ministries in discernment before and ever since we were ordained. However, in General Convention 2003, the Episcopal Church changed the canons with respect to church orders including the laity. The changes in Title III of the Canons which include the relevant requirements for formation and continuing education for all orders can be found if you follow this link: http://www.churchpublishing.org/general_convention/pdf_blue_2003/19-MinistryDevelopment.pdf. Nevertheless, let's put here the opening section of that document and consider its impact on lifelong learning.

TITLE III; MINISTRY

CANON 1: Of the Ministry of All Baptized Persons

Sec. 1. Each Diocese shall make provision for the affirmation and development of the ministry of all baptized persons, including:

(a) Assistance in understanding that all baptized persons are called to minister in Christ's name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church and to serve Christ's mission at all times and in all places.

(b) *Assistance in understanding that all baptized persons are called to sustain their ministries through commitment to life-long Christian formation.* [emphasis added]

While I take learning to be a broader term than formation, let me state that lifelong learning is explicit to formation. Let me say again that while this essay is prepared for deacons, what I suggest in the thesis as it applies to deacons is broadly applicable to all orders within the church, laity, deacons, priests, bishops, and all organizational structures where we function as the church, e.g., the standing committees, the diocesan commissions, etc. For that matter, given that the baptismal covenant is the underpinning set of promises of all the baptized, and given that the ordained ministry is ordered, in part, to further the development of all the baptized, it is the overarching set of promises for everyone, and all other promises from the ordinal derive from them.

A variety of workshops, grants, and provincial, diocesan, and congregational meetings have been held throughout the church to consider these changes to the canons. The North American Association for the Diaconate [NAAD] received a Constable Grant to offer regional workshops on the importance of lifelong learning with respect to Title III and offered advice and consultation to many dioceses throughout the Church with respect to the implementation of Title III as it affects deacons in particular but all orders in general. Nevertheless, since 2003, there are still many dioceses throughout the church which have not yet fully implemented these changes, and there is still some confusion and neglect with respect to the implementation of them among bishops, standing committees, clergy, commissions on ministry, and commissions on education, and the laos. Though I begin with the canons of Title III as they apply to deacons because they are explicit to competency, the content of this paper continues to define learning and development in the context of competency.

TITLE III

CANON III.6.3

(b) Before ordination each Candidate shall be prepared in and demonstrate basic competence in five general areas:

(1) Academic studies including, The Holy Scriptures, theology, and the tradition of the Church.

(2) Diakonia and the diaconate.

(3) Human awareness and understanding.

- (4) Spiritual development and discipline.
- (5) Practical training and experience.

Though these requirements for deacons are in terms of basic competence for ordination, they are also useful in the context of lifelong learning and germane to continuing education because conceptually competence is a developmental and lifelong endeavor. Frankly, like the relationship between formation and lifelong learning—referred to above—a similar relationship exists between lifelong learning and continuing education. The best continuing education is engaged in the context of lifelong learning and not something to be considered separate from it. In addition, continuing education clarifies that competency is a process that strives for improvement over time, i.e., it is developmental and dynamic, not static. That deacons must demonstrate minimal competency for the purpose of ordination, they are not nor are we ever completely competent in ministry and mission. We are in continual development over time and are morally obligated to practice, assess our practice, and learn new ideas and strategies to meet the obligations of our promises whether we choose the promises of the baptismal covenant or the promises of the ordinal. Nevertheless, with respect to the confusion referred to above, at least some of this confusion results from what we mean by competency, what we mean by lifelong learning, and what we mean by continuing education.

Therefore, for the purpose of this dialogue and the idea that lifelong learning is a moral imperative, competency is a developmental idea about putting into our praxis our continued learning that informs and improves our competencies. Competence is developmental in that we expect that our ability to perform ministry and live up to our obligations and promises, we are must continually learn and improve as ministers and coparticipants with God in the call to participate in Christ's mission.

We live in a world of rapid change...

To continue to set this context I will make yet another assertion. We live a life in constant change, our competency for mission and ministry must constantly change, must constantly be assessed, and must constantly improve. Change is directly connected and explicit to an imperative to lifelong learning and the source of what it is we need to learn comes from the assessment of our promises, how well we live into them, and what we need to learn in order to improve our praxis.

Our constant engagement with God and the world is one based on change. Our relationships constantly experience change, our vision is to implement change, our requirement as coparticipants with God to assist in the building of the Kingdom is to effect change while helping to implement the Kingdom of God. In fact, our fundamental relationship to God anticipates and expects change. Our understanding of relationship to God and to one another is that we love both God and one another. We know that we sin both in our love for God and in our love for one another. We know we stand in the

grace of God, but we also know that there is at the heart of our prayer lives and our relationships a need for repentance that requires change. The very nature of repentance is that we turn around, we change the directions our lives are taking and we try to do better. This is fundamental change.

We pray that God's Kingdom will come here on earth as it is in heaven. Our expectation is that God's heaven will fully arrive sometime in the future and that our constant hope and ministry is to live into that hope. If we are to realize that vision, we live in constant expectation that everything will change. In yet another prayer of the church—the prayer at the Easter Vigil and at all ordinations—we pray:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

If things cast down are being raised up and things that are old are being made new, then we expect that there is evidence of God's power to change all that is in our experience. Change is our expectation, change is our hope, change is the work of the Christian, change to bring into being the Kingdom of God. If all that is around us is in a state of constant and expected change, our own selves included, then in order to see it, in order to be sustained by it, in order to understand and live into it, we must be constantly learning that we may discern the wisdom of God as St Paul says. It is through this discernment that we live up to our charge to interpret to the church the hopes, needs, and concerns of the world.

The Baptismal Covenant

Here is the Christian beginning point for committing to a life that embraces lifelong learning. We made certain claims as Christians and we committed our lives consciously to a set of promises when we were baptized. This is the list from the Service of Baptism.

The Baptismal Covenant

Celebrant	Do you believe in God the Father?
People	I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth...
Celebrant	Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
People	I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...

- Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
 People I believe in the Holy Spirit, ...
- Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
 People I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
 People I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
 People I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
 People I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
 People I will, with God's help.

The first three declarations of belief are within the context of the Apostles' Creed, sometimes referred to as the Baptismal Creed.

The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 304-305

If we take these promises seriously and I believe we do or that we want to, then it is a good idea to at least annually reflect on what we promised. It may be helpful to think of these declarations and promises as the source and need for competences. Certainly, these are the things we want to live out and these are the things we want to inform and by which we assess our growth and development and our lifelong learning which provides continual improvement in our competency as participants in Christ's mission.

Let me take one more look at the notion of competence as a developmental idea in the context of these promises. Since we think of these promises as the basis for our competencies, then we also need to think of competence as a developmental. That is to say, every Christian is competent to some degree at all these promises, but as our lives pass, as we mature, as we live to put into practice what we promise or what we believe, then we hope that we will grow, we hope that we will change, we hope that we will become more competent, and in order to do that we have to continually learn. We have to learn about who we are, we have to learn about what we promised, and we have to learn how we can become better in our commitments.

In order to illustrate the nature of the need to learn in order to grow into these promises, let me use just one as an example, ...I will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Considering this single promise, what do we mean by justice? Are we talking about distributive justice, retributive justice, environmental justice, social justice, the law...? Simply coming to an understanding of justice is a learning adventure for most of us. If we lay on top of that questions about human justice, God's justice, American justice, Nigerian justice, Muslim justice,... the ideas become more complex, more textured, more diffuse. When we add to that the obligation to respect the dignity of all human beings, peace can seem near at hand to us or far off depending on the circumstances and happenings of daily life and/or any given stage in our lifespan and in development of our worldviews. In order to engage the promise with any authenticity, we have to commit ourselves to a process of lifelong learning about justice.

What do we mean by peace? Surely we do not mean simply the absence of war. I believe that since the promise is both/and we need to consider peace through justice instead of peace through victory. What would it look like to our social structure and our commitment to social power, the production of weapons of mass destruction, the use of these weapons in preemptive war-making? How do we square working for justice that leads to peace rather than power that leads to peace?

What is the nature of respect? Do we mean something more than tolerance? What is the nature and connection of respect to love? If we look at the sermon on the mount in Matthew or the sermon on the plain in Luke, how do we live up to the radical love of God and one another in light of the radical love God has for all creation? How can reconciliation occur unless there is fundamentally a loving relationship established between God and all creation? Does respect in this promise imply this kind of loving relationship.

From this single promise in the context of lifelong learning, there are sufficient opportunities of lifelong learning in these short lists of questions I've opened and there are certainly many more questions that can be asked about this promise all of which demand assessment, change, and application in living into this covenantal promise.

This example serves to illustrate how our baptismal covenant is one source for the criteria a Christian lives by, how these criteria demand change in our lives, and how this change must be informed by continual learning. To discern the will of God—what is good, and acceptable and perfect, is a never-ending process that we cannot achieve alone, that we cannot achieve without continually assessing our lives in the context of the promises we've made in our baptisms and in our ordinations, nor in our lifetimes but toward which we strive together so we can respond as best we're able to God's grace and forgiveness and the building of the Kingdom.

The Covenant and Competency

When I and my colleagues who are passionate about the relationship between the baptismal covenant and the concept of competence have conversations about this relationship, I am constantly reminded by them that the relationship needs to be explicit rather than intuitive. The promises are not competences, but they are the expressions of commitment to Christ's mission. The skills and abilities implied by the promises and the knowledge required to live into them are the competencies. Let's consider the promise ... I will, with God's help, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself... Immediately a set of questions occur which may begin with ...what do I need to...

- What do I need to seek Christ in another person?
 - What would Christ look like?
 - How do I know Christ?
 - Where can I find out what Christ looks like?
 - What kind of relationship would I need with another person in order to see Christ in that person?
 - What is a seeking relationship?
- What do I need to serve Christ?
 - Is service based on my gifts and capacities?
 - Is service about spirituality or doing something or both?
 - How does my service show Christ to others?
 - Must I see Christ in myself in order to see Christ in others?
- What I need to know my neighbor (though a classic question, it's nonetheless germane)?
 - What did Christ say about this question?
 - How does Christ's life model this commitment?
 - How does my life reflect my understanding of this relationship?
- What do I need to put this promise into practice?
 - Do I need Bible study?
 - Do I need a spiritual advisor?
 - Do I need a study group?
 - Do I need to reflect on these questions in community?
 - Do I need to take a course?
 - Do I need to read a book or several books?
 - Do I need to ...

From four overarching questions, twenty others emerge. It is not my intention to present this list as exhaustive but representative. Developing these questions is a process of analysis that is applicable to all the promises for which we bear responsible whether they come from our baptismal covenant or from the ordinal.

What do I do with these questions?

Clearly this process of analysis consists of at least three parts. First, what are the skills I need to live into the promise; second, how do I acquire them; and third, how do I put them into practice?

It is important not to be overwhelmed by the questions that emerge from the promise we make. We have our entire lives to work on these promises. From the analyses that proceed from these promises, we must narrow to a list that is manageable and go to work based on what is realistic, in a timeframe that is workable, with the resources that are available.

Out of this list I may only be able in the next year to work with a spiritual director and join a bible study group that seriously reflects on applying the text to my life. What I settle on doing is the learning plan that emerges from the promises and an analysis of them. It may be that I want to reflect on my promises with others and offer analysis and advice to one another as we think through each of the promises we made. Once I settle on my learning plan, it is important to share the plan with someone (the bishop, the commission on ministry, the congregation leadership, a very close friend to whom I am accountable or willing to be accountable) so that some level of accountability is incorporated into the plan and the process I choose.

While I look at the development of this learning plan for my own personal application, it is important to notice that this is the underlying process each diocese needs to implement Title III. This is the kind of learning that serves Christ's mission and that makes me more competent in living into my promises. This is the kind of learning that is lifelong and informs praxis. This is the type of learning to which each of us are morally obligated.

The Ordinal Promises and Competency...

Now I turn to the ordination promises we make as deacons. I could as well turn to the promises made by those to be ordained priest or bishop, but the audience is intended for deacons, so I will choose from among our promises. I will not put them into the Book of Common Prayer format as I did the baptismal covenant, but simply list them. They are taken from several places throughout the ordinal and I simply collected all of them together into a single list. You can find these in the cited pages of the Book of Common Prayer that follows the promises.

As a deacon of the church, I promise:

1. To believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation;
2. To conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church.

3. To serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.
4. To study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model my life upon them.
5. To make Christ and his redemptive love known, by my word and example, to those among whom I live, and work, and worship.
6. To interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.
7. To assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments,
8. To carry out other duties assigned to me from time to time.
9. To show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.
10. To be guided by the pastoral direction and leadership of my bishop?
11. To be faithful in prayer, and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures?
12. To look for Christ in all others, being ready to help and serve those in need?
13. To do my best to pattern my life [and that of my family, or household, or community] in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that I may be a wholesome example to all people?
14. To seek not my glory but the glory of the Lord Christ?

Then it is important to consider what the Church prays for in light of these promises.

Based on: Book of Common Prayer, Ordination of a Deacon, pp. 537-545

As I did with the baptismal covenant above, let me simply choose one of the promises and construct the questions for analysis. Number five above says that I promise ...to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by my word and example, to those among whom I live, and work, and worship. Immediately the following questions emerge from this promise, and just as before they begin with ...what do I need to...

- What do I need to understand redemptive love?
 - What is redemptive love?
 - How does that differ from any other kind of love and what special constraints does that place on me?
 - Is it my redemptive love or Christ's redemptive love I need to understand?
- What do I need to proclaim the word?
 - What is proclamation?
 - How does that differ from explanation?
 - What do I need to know to proclaim redemptive love?
 - Where do I find it?
 - How will I understand it?

- What do I need to be an example?
 - To whom am I to be an example?
 - How do I exemplify Christ?
 - How do I exemplify Christ's redemptive love?

As before, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list but a suggestive list. As before, it provides the basis for analysis and the development of a learning plan. As before, it is important not to be overwhelmed by the questions that emerge from the promise we make. From the analyses that proceed from these promises, we narrow to a list that is we can manage and go to work based on what is realistic, in a timeframe that is workable, with the resources that are available.

All I may be able to do this year is work with scripture and my spiritual director. Perhaps a course on homiletics from the internet, a local college, a seminary website, etc. Maybe I can work on hermeneutics by taking an Education for Ministry class and concentrate on theological reflection. Maybe there is a tutor or mentor whom I know and respect that can work with me to think through these ideas. Maybe there are other deacons who have more experience at this and would work with me to develop these ideas and give me further ideas for applying what I learn.

While I look at the development of this learning plan for my own personal need, it is important to notice that this is the underlying process each diocese needs in order to implement Title III. Archdeacons, bishops, commissions on ministry need to think through this kind of learning and how it impacts Christ's mission in their diocese. This is the kind of learning that needs to be in partnership with those responsible for Title III in the diocesan structure and those who are growing in competency in the church, laos, deacons, priests, and the bishops too. This is the kind of learning that serves Christ's mission and that makes us more competent in living into our promises. This is the kind of learning that is lifelong and informs praxis. This is the type of learning to which all of us are morally obligated.

An unexamined life...

Socrates said that an unexamined life is not worth living. My friend told me that someone said an unexamined life is immoral. We couldn't find the reference to that claim so if you can't find the reference to it either, I present it as the thesis with which we began. The process of lifelong learning is applicable to all areas of our lives, it's the basis and purpose of living, and it's essential to Christ's mission and our parts in that mission.

The dialogue is open. My questions to the readers of this piece are:

- Do we agree that lifelong learning is an imperative?
- Do we agree that lifelong learning is essential to living into our promises and therefore is intimately connected to Christ's mission?
- Do we agree that the imperative is grounded in our Christian commitments and takes on a moral obligation?
- Do we agree that Title III of the canons are met through this process of learning?
- Do we agree that the process will require commitment and resources and as members of standing committees, commissions on ministry, and directors of formation programs, as well as bishops, priests, and deacons are morally committed to the implementation of Title III and are therefore willing and committed to make the resources available to the church?

Let me end with where I began. As I see it, lifelong learning is a moral imperative.