

NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE DIACONATE

Centre for the Diaconate *Monograph Series*

# Laos and the Diaconate

by

## The 1986 Sindicators Meeting



Monograph Series No. 4  
PDF Edition

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

## 1986 Sindicators Meeting Laos and the Diaconate

*Sindicators is a think-tank of church leaders which meets every year to ponder one of the many issues in the development of total ministry. The 11th year meeting in 1986 met in Scottsdale, Arizona in February to focus on deacons and diaconal ministry.*

*There were 24 persons in attendance including bishops, presbyters, deacons and lay professionals representing 11 diocese and several national church organizations.*

*The twofold topic was:*

- 1. Encouraging all Christian people in ministry beyond the gathered church community.*
- 2. How the renewal of the diaconate in particular fits in with the larger question of ongoing empowerment of the laos for extra-parochial ministry.*

*Starting point for the discussion was a collection of 19 vignettes used as a means of focusing discussion both in small group discussions and plenary sessions. The vignettes were prepared by deacons illustrating ways they encouraged the laity in ministry beyond the church community and also how the laity is not encouraged.*

*Because these issues are so important to the rediscovery of the servant nature of the church, an extensive presentation of the learnings of the Sindicators conference follows. The dialogue and conclusions are central to each person's formation of their own framework for ministry.*

### 1. The primacy of baptism over ordination

*Key questions and issues:*

1. Does the renewal of the diaconate conflict or does it support the simultaneous renewal of the ministry of all baptized Christians?
2. How might we avoid a potential competitiveness between the role of the deacon and ministry of the laity?
3. How can we move away from treating ordination as an award/reward, and towards understanding it as a yoke of servanthood?
4. How do we provide training and formation programs for our deacons which might support the ministry of the individual deacon without diminishing the primacy of the ministry of the whole laos?

*Summary of learnings*

There was a refreshing and stimulating discussion of the diaconate, starting not from the comparison of the role of the deacon with that of the priest, but rather by asking how the office of deacon in the church might support the ministry of all baptized. The focus of the dialogue was on the primacy of baptism over ordination. All ministry is Christ's. All members of the laos, whether ordained or not, are called to share in the life and mission of the church. Ordination provides "offices." Persons are "ordered" to the church that **it** may minister in the world.

We miss the mark when we think and act as if the challenge in revitalizing the diaconate is to get the priest to share his or her ministry. The role of the deacon, as indeed for the priest and bishop, can only be identified in direct relationship to the ministry of the laos as a whole.

Clearly, this orientation assumes a view of the church which is not hierarchical, but is characterized by shared servant leadership more accurately symbolized by a circle than a pyramid. Deacon Phina Borgeson offered the image of the amoeba: the nucleus (Christ) is ever-present and always the cohesive focal point, but the basic shape and structure of the gathered church must be flexible and adaptable to fit the given place and time in which the Body of Christ is called to serve. Leadership must be shared, based in teams of equal partners in ministry.

Holding this view in our sociocultural environment is certainly swimming against the current of the popular world view. Indeed, there is an implicit danger in the revitalizing of the diaconate that some could accept it as a strengthening of the hierarchical structure of the church. Still, the rebirth of the diaconate as a distinct and separate office in the church seems worth the risk. When good teaching and modeling is used, the presence of the deacon in any congregation offers tremendous opportunity for affirming not only the basic vocation of all Christians to servanthood, but also the basic character of all Christian leadership as being that of shared servanthood.

However it may be accomplished in each individual diocese and congregation, a conscious and deliberate effort must be made to treat ordination not as a reward/award for the cream of the laity, but rather as a yoke of servanthood for those who are gifted for and called to a particular office which strengthens and enables the ministry of all baptized. This effort must guide our policies and practice with regard to discernment of gifts, identification and calling forth those so gifted for an ordained office, for training, formation and ongoing support and nurture as persons called to the diaconate. Too often, our past efforts at formation have tended to support the hierarchical model. Socialization in institutional training settings has tended to foster clericalism. The assumption that a candidate for ordination enters the process for preparation as an unmolded piece of clay, without past experience as a minister, without gifts, and without knowledge or background in the faith must be eliminated. Formation must first recognize existing ministries, honor and affirm gifts, and take as its starting point the vocation which has already made itself manifest in the ongoing life of the congregation which has called that person forth.

## **2. The deacon as icon of Christ's servanthood**

*Key questions and issues:*

1. How does the deacon serve as icon?
2. What is the deacon an icon for?
3. Does an icon stand between the people and their God?
4. How do you have an icon without status?
5. How does the liturgical role of the deacon support the ongoing ministry of the laos as a whole?

## *Summary of learnings*

An icon is a window, or perhaps more accurately a prism, through which the divine light shines on creation. An icon is not an end in itself, but exists only to point beyond itself to the divine. So the deacon, as an icon of Christ's servanthood, is not an end in himself or herself. The existence of the diaconate in the church is not to honor those in that office, nor is it to bestow upon a certain group the responsibility of doing the ministry of diakonia for the rest of us. The presence of the deacon, in the liturgy and in the life of the church, is to shed light upon the diakonia of Christ, the ministry of servanthood to which all members of the laos are called.

Once again we must acknowledge that the serving ministry of our Lord to which we are called is something which moves upstream against the current of the world view. This was true in our Lord's time, and seems even more true today. For this reason, the importance of the diaconate in the church today is utterly apparent.

It was noted that it is possible for devotion to an icon to become blasphemous. An iconostasis can be erected which seems to block one's access to God. This being true, is it possible that the revitalizing of the diaconate tempts some to fall into these sorts of traps? This seems to echo the discussion above concerning clericalism. If the deacon is seen to establish a hierarchy through which one must go to "get to God," we have problems. If, on the other hand, the deacon is seen as a true icon, as a window through which God is perceived and which draws us through to a broader vision of the ministry of all baptized, these dangers disappear.

One important observation made by the group was that there is a direct link between action and the icon of servanthood. In other words, the role of the deacon in the liturgy is validated by his or her weekday work. If the deacon is a notorious servant in the midst of life, his or her presence in the liturgy and in the life of the church at all points, greatly enhances and lifts up the basic vocation of all Christians to diakonia. When this is not the case, a deacon might well be perceived by some to be either a prima dona lay person or a half priest, neither of which represents the integrity of the deacon in the life and mission of the church.

In discussing the role of the deacon in the liturgy, most emphasis was given to the offertory. This discussion in some ways epitomizes the overall perspective of the group. The significant action at the offertory is certainly not the priest raising up the gifts, nor even the deacon preparing the table and receiving the gifts. The important and central act is the offering of the people, which includes the presentation of the money, representing the lives and labor of the people of God, the bread and the wine, also coming from the productive efforts of God's people, and any other offerings which might appropriately and effectively embody the intersection between the daily life and work of those present, with the Great Thanksgiving and the nourishment and strengthening for continued service which is to follow. All too often, at present, our liturgies focus more on the clergy receiving the gifts rather than on those who are making the offering. We might well need to invent appropriate ways to highlight the offering itself, rather than the receiving.

### 3. The role of the deacon in empowering the ministry of the laos

#### *Key questions and issues*

What role can the deacon play in discerning gifts and empowering members of the laos for ministry?

#### *Summary of learnings*

In examining the vignettes offered by various deacons from around the country, it was clear that there is a significant contribution being made by the renewed diaconate in the extension of the ministry of the whole church into the world. In some cases, deacons are spearheading the important and effective projects and programs of outreach. In other cases, deacons are actively participating in the process of discerning gifts and training members of the laos for ministry. One deacon described herself as a "broker." It was felt that above all else, a deacon must appreciate the diversity of gifts present in a congregation and be prepared to affirm and encourage persons to become intentional about carrying on their ministry in the world, whether professional or volunteer, formal or informal.

Jean Haldane made the point that a distinction must be made between enabling laity to minister in church-sponsored outreach, and empowering laity for a ministry and prophetic role in the institutions and structures of society where they work and live. In the former, the deacons' role is one of leadership, recruitment, and training of the laity for the church-sponsored project. In the latter, the deacons' role is one of listening to laity, perhaps visiting them in their places of work (as Phina Borgeson did) in order to understand better the issues, tensions, and opportunities for carrying out a ministering and prophetic role. This specifically does *not* require leadership and recruitment, but rather support, trust, and help when it is asked for. Both diaconal roles are needed; we know a good deal more about the first one and are apt to overlook or discount the second one. The first role is in line with the traditional role of clergy, the second describes a new understanding of empowering laity and their ministries.

As the group talked, it was clear that there needed to be some real flexibility and fluidity in the role of the deacon in our congregations. It would not be helpful to restrict our deacons to a one dimensional, uniform role in the life of the church. A variety of structures and uses of time and talent is necessary to effectively empower the laos for ministry. We are beginning to sense some standards along these lines. The role of the deacon must involve assisting laity to bring their unique perspective on issues of justice and reconciliation and assist the deacon to articulate the needs of the world to the church.

#### 4. Intentional ministry beyond the “walls” of the gathered church

##### *Key questions and issues*

1. How can we escape our preoccupation with “in-house” church activities and redirect our principal energies towards the ministry of all baptized Christians out in the world in their daily lives and work?
2. What characterizes the ministry of all believers out in the world?
3. What issues related to the future of the world and church are most crucial?

##### *Summary of learnings*

The group had a hard time talking about the distinction between church and world implicit in the above questions. The ecclesiology of most present challenged the validity of such a distinction in the first place. You can't talk about ministry *in the church* as opposed to *ministry out in the world* as if the two were separate and distinct activities. Still, the need to see the ministry of all baptized persons as going out beyond the parochial concerns of the gathered, institutional, programmatic church was so pressing, the group found themselves making repeated reference to the distinction anyway. Perhaps facetiously, the most common terms used for the contrast were **in-house** versus **out-house** ministry.

At one point, Bernard Haldane made a particularly helpful observation. The better job the church does at supporting persons in their daily ministries out in the world, the easier it will be to motivate persons to pitch in and assist in the in-house ministries needed to maintain the fabric of the institutional life of the church. If, instead of concentrating on how we are going to get people to serve on the vestry, altar guild, Sunday School staff, etc., we were to spend time supporting our people in seeing their so-called “secular” vocations as being significant forms of ministry, we would find those same people more than ready to contribute time, treasure, and talent to maintain the physical and corporate needs of the church. In the Diocese of California, the Lay Academy's experience shows that the people then feel they *are* the church.

Bernard went on to suggest that there are two kinds of offerings: sacrificial offerings and offerings of the heart. A sacrificial offering is done out of obligation and leads to burn-out. It is an energy-draining experience. An offering of the heart is one that is in line with your gifts. This giving validates one's meaning, and thus it is given in love, and in giving love is received back. This is an experience which energizes the giver to give still more. If a Christian's life's work is an offering of the heart, the church can help a person to identify this fact. In light of this, it could be expected that a person might also gratefully and energetically offer time, talent, and treasure for the maintenance of the institutional life of the church.

Unhappily, the church today is too often institutionally focused. We create a separation for our people which makes it difficult for them to connect their daily lives with their involvement in the ongoing life of the church. A key issue is one related to intentionality. How do we assist the members of the body of Christ to be intentional about going out into the world in His name? Phina Borgeson, in reflecting on the vignettes which she collected for the group, asked the important question: “Must

supporting and enabling the ministry of lay people be a program, or are there ways in which it is done informally which we are failing to identify and celebrate?" Indeed, if we are able to become more effective in our efforts in this area, we will have to broaden our understanding not only of what constitutes ministry *in the world*, but also of what constitutes support and enablement of that ministry.

As reflection continued on these matters, it was necessary to be reminded there are a number of significant factors which promise to bring major changes in our sociocultural environment. Chief among these are factors relating to the growing reality of unemployment. Bernard Haldane reported from his recent research that we simply must anticipate that our entire societal work structure (and, hence work ethic) is about to be drastically altered. This carries with it far-reaching implications for the future structural needs and demands which will be called for in the church. This matter was deemed so crucial to the discussion, it found its way into the chosen topic for the 1987 Sindicators gathering.

## **5. Structures and models for shared leadership**

### *Key questions and issues*

1. If there is one ministry, Christ's shared with the church through baptism, what structures would reflect and embody this assumption?
2. What is the relationship between the deacon and the rest of the church from a structural point of view?
3. How do we authorize, rather than simply validate, ministry of all deacons and of all baptized?
4. What characterizes a healthy model of "shared leadership" in the church?

### *Summary of learnings*

As discussed in previous sections of this report, a chief question here concerns an ecclesiastical structure which for many centuries has been hierarchical in nature. The group assembled was clearly committed to the New Testament model of leadership in the church, one that was more circular than hierarchical. It was the consensus of those present that role fixations usually prevent openness and growth. If the deacon participates in the hierarchical model of the church, he or she will usually find himself or herself serving as a sort of bridge or link between the priest and other members of the congregation. If, for example, a deacon is functioning as a curate, he or she is not serving the church as a deacon in the fullest sense. Something, in fact, has gone terribly wrong. On the other hand, if the priest and deacon(s) in a congregation can join with other leaders in the congregation to form a true shared leadership team, the presence and functioning of a deacon can make a powerful and effective contribution to the life of the congregation.

In considering this topic in general, we felt that before concerning ourselves too much with alternative structures, we should first consider how to reform "mindsets." It does no good to reshape the institutional hierarchy if we have not first rediscovered and affirmed the true nature of shared servant leadership.

One small group produced a most helpful list of certain characteristics of this style of leadership in the church:

**Shared servant leadership:**

- is always consultative
- Opens up the system
- results in few unpleasant surprises and/or rude awakenings
- takes more time
- meets all “genuine” needs through expressing gifts collegially
- considers the context in which we minister and live out our life as church (especially in this information age)
- builds ownership of decisions
- uses and integrates the gifts of the whole community
- has to begin somewhere (must be modeled by those who have the vision)
- is spiritually grounded
- is under the discipline of (is accountable to) the community
- is rooted in and inspires trust
- allows the possibility of calling any baptized person to any office
- involves discernment and election by the community (or representative body).

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Reprinted from DIAKONEO, Volume VIII, Number 1, Spring 1986. Published by North American Association for the Diaconate. With contributions by Deacon Josephine Borgeson and Bishop James Kelsey.

Participants:

The Rev. Jim Kelsey  
The Rev. Preston T. Kelsey, II (Pete)  
Deacon Charles Woltz  
The Rev. George Schulenberg  
Deacon Gloria Wheeler  
The Rev. Doyle Turner  
The Rev. Stewart C. Zabriskie  
Deacon Bonnie Polley  
Ms. Barbara Garrett  
Deacon Josephine Borgeson  
Deacon James Weber  
The Rev. James M. Barnett

Mr. Gary T. Evans  
Ms. Jean Haldane  
Mr. Bernard Haldane  
Deacon Eleanor Hill  
The Rev. James L. Lowery, Jr.  
Bishop Wesley Frensdorff  
Bishop George C. Harris  
Howard Anderson  
Deacon Barbara Riker  
Deacon Elizabeth Turner  
The Rev. R. B. Lloyd  
The Rev. Michael Garrison

Note: List of participants provided by Phina Borgeson.

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