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Lifting Up the Servants of God:
The Deacon, Servant ministry,
and the Future of the Church

by

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Lifting Up the Servants of God: The Deacon, Servant Ministry, and the Future of the Church

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God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.

Book of Common Prayer, p 543

Diakonia and the Church

The order of deacons is the oldest of the orders of ordained ministry, having reached a stage of definition earlier than that of the better known orders of priest (usually rendered presbyter, from the Greek presbuteros, or elder) or of bishop. The word “deacon” derives from the Greek word diakonia. It had a variety of meanings, from service at tables to that of an agent entrusted with authority to negotiate a contract or treaty. Incorporating these multiple meanings, the concept of diakonia defined the early church in its first centuries.

Baptism provided entry into the Christian community, whose members were called and sent to serve. Jesus himself expresses an awareness of his call to serve, as described in his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). In turn, he commissioned and sent the Twelve as well as the Seventy. Essential to this was a call to serve. As Jesus put it, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27) and “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Luke 12:37). The diakonia of Jesus and the Apostles was the inauguration of the reign of God, where the hungry would be fed, the blind would see, and the deaf would hear.

Foundations of the Diaconate

Thus the concept of diakonia was central to both the vision of Jesus and of his apostles. As such it belongs to all the members of the church, through their baptism, to help bring about God’s reign on earth. In Paul’s letters we hear of the Spirit who

empowers different members of the church, calling some to be teachers, some prophets, some apostles. "All these are activated by one and the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:11).

We see in the New Testament the development of the orders of bishops and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-13, Philippians 1:1). Outside of the New Testament, evidence for the development of the orders of ministry is found in the writings of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, martyred around 112. Ignatius is the earliest example of the three-fold understanding of ordained ministry within the church. He presented unity with the Bishop as a symbol of unity with the one God of the Christians, the presbyters as representing the council of the apostles, and the deacons as symbols of Christ: "Everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as one bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God's council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a church without these" (Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Trallians, 3).

The First Deacons

Perhaps the best-known description of the development of the diaconate occurs in the Book of Acts. Tension arose between Greek and Jewish converts in Jerusalem. Acts tells us that the Apostles asked the community to "select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the world" (Acts 6:3-4).

The task to which the new deacons were appointed was to be agents of social justice expressed as serving at table. The issue was to ensure a just distribution of the food for the (minority) Greek widows and orphans.

The community chose the Seven, apparently from the Hellenistic or Greek Christians, to serve the community. The apostles laid their hands upon them to set them apart for this ministry of service. Among these was Stephen, called the "protomartyr" or "first martyr" for the faith. Stephen did "great signs and wonders" (Acts 6:8) and, like Jesus, fell afoul of the ruling authorities in Jerusalem on account of his proclamation of the Good News. He was eventually stoned to death.

The Golden Age of the Deacon

The first three centuries of the church have been called the Golden Age of the Deacon. As Christianity spread the diaconate flourished. Deacons developed distinctive functions within the Christian community. They were charged with collecting and distributing money to the poor. In particular the Church of Rome divided itself into seven different districts, over each of which a deacon was given charge of the church's social services. In addition deacons have always had a special relationship to the bishop, serving as the eyes and ears of the bishop, bringing the concerns of the community to the bishop. The earliest ordination prayer, contained in the writings of Hippolytus, notes that it is the bishop alone who lays hands on deacons.

Deacons also had roles within the liturgy, calling the people to prayer, reading the Gospel, and assisting in the distribution of communion. Deacons were also integral to the preparation of those seeking baptism (called catechumens). At that time, a catechumen underwent a three-year period of preparation. Deacons both taught and prepared the catechumens as well as assisted the bishop in the actual baptismal rite.

This was also the time of famous deacons within the church, from Lawrence, deacon of the church of Rome, to Ephraim of Syria, preacher and hymn-writer. It was also a period when deacons, as a result of their close ties with the bishop and with church administration, were elected bishop. Athanasius of Alexandria, steady defender of Nicene orthodoxy, is perhaps the best example of this. He was first a deacon and secretary to the Bishop of Alexandria at the Council of Nicaea (325) and was eventually elected bishop himself. The diaconate was often held for life. The progression from deacon to presbyter to bishop, though becoming increasingly more common, was still not the norm.

The Shift to a Transitional Diaconate

As the church experienced dramatic growth following end of persecution and the conversion of Constantine (313), the diaconate began to be overshadowed. This was due in part to the increased prestige of the role of the bishop in the Imperial Church. As the church grew, the bishop could no longer serve as the primary pastor of the community. More and more sacramental authority and pastoral oversight was ceded to the presbyters, who began to be called priests. Likewise, the church adapted itself to the overwhelmingly hierarchical structures of Roman society. Leadership of the church began to be accepted as a progression of grades through which one passed. Other orders developed “below” the diaconate (doorkeeper, exorcist, lector, and subdeacon). Would-be clerics passed successively through these orders, to the diaconate, and then to the priesthood. While the other orders eventually disappeared, the order of deacon remained, but primarily as a “transitional” diaconate, simply a stepping-stone on the way to the priesthood.

The Diaconate Obscured after Francis of Assisi

Throughout the Middle Ages, the diaconate remained obscured as a transitional step to priesthood. The sense of diakonia also slipped away, to emerge in the charism of some of the religious orders which proliferated in those years. The most notable exception and symbol of this was “everybody's favorite saint,” Francis of Assisi who remained a deacon during his life as friar in what became an order dedicated particularly to the needs of the poor and marginalized.

The Deacon in the Reformation

The English Reformation continued with the ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons (unlike the theology of ministry developed by the Presbyterian and some

Lutheran churches), but the diaconate still was seen as a transition to the priesthood. There were some notable deacons in the centuries following the Reformation. Nicholas Ferrar and the community he gathered at Little Gidding (UK) is still remembered as offering a “counter-cultural” model for living the Christian life.

The Episcopal Church in the United States followed in the footsteps of the Church of England, enshrining in its ordination service the concept that the ministry of the deacon was that of “an inferior office” (1928 BCP, p. 535) through which one hoped to advance. The priesthood was considered to be the fullest expression of ministry.

The Recovery of Diakonia

In 19th century Europe, the Lutheran churches on the continent sought to respond to the social upheaval and economic disparities created by the industrial revolution and the breakdown of traditional political systems. Orders of deaconesses and deacons were formed to perform servant ministry in ways that laid the groundwork for a wider “social gospel.”

The Deacon in the Twentieth Century

Since the 1960’s the diaconate within the Episcopal Church has undergone a remarkable rebirth. Prior to this time, the diaconate as a lifelong ministry did exist and manifested itself in three distinct forms. Deacons were ordained to minister to Native Americans and other ethnic groups (such as David Pendleton Oakerhater). Women were set apart as “deaconesses” and performed diaconal ministry, even if not recognized at the time as “deacons.” The “perpetual” diaconate of the 1950’s, created deacons who performed primarily liturgical tasks at a time when demand for priests outstripped the supply, particular in growing areas such as California.

In 1962, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church voted to restore a permanent diaconate. Building from this foundation, the 1968 Anglican Lambeth Conference likewise passed a resolution commending the restoration of the diaconate throughout the Anglican Communion.

The Deacon in the World Today

The 1970’s and 1980’s witnessed a phenomenal resurgence of the deacon within the Episcopal Church. By the 1990’s the number of deacons was nearly double that of the previous decade. Deacons function in almost every imaginable setting within the Episcopal Church. They are often categorized three ways.

Many function as **parish deacons**, leading, modeling, and encouraging the diaconal ministry of all the baptized. Deacons can be found in urban cathedrals such as Grace Cathedral in San Francisco as well as in the smallest of rural missions in Nevada, and everywhere in between. It is the dream of some bishops that there be at least two deacons in every congregation.

Some are **institutional deacons** who work as chaplains in prisons, for law enforcement teams and firefighters, in hospitals, hospices, and in schools.

A few are **diocesan deacons** working with and for their bishops in a variety of staff and leadership roles. In the Diocese of California, for example, a deacon serves as Archdeacon for Deacons and another serves as Coordinator for Social Ministries.

The above is but a rough outline of the many and varied ways in which deacons serve in the church. In all that they do, today's deacons are centered on fulfilling the role as an image of Christ, called and sent to serve in the world and mobilizing the baptized for service. This was Jesus' ministry and something which Ignatius of Antioch recognized eighteen hundred years ago.

The Deacon and the Future of the Episcopal Church

The recovery of the diaconate as a "full and equal order" of ministry has come a long way. There is still much more to be done. Misconceptions still hover around the idea of the diaconate. Some are in part traceable to the fact that the distinction in role between deacon and priest was never clearly defined in the early church. Likewise the experiment of the "perpetual" diaconate of the 1950's (ended in the 1970's) further blurred the boundary between deacons and priests. In those days, before there were Lay Eucharistic Ministers, deacons tended to function almost exclusively as liturgical assistants, often chosen by the Rector. This led to a hazy image of deacons as being "junior" priests.

The current rebirth of the order of deacon needs to be clearly distinguished from most persons' experience of the diaconate prior to the 1970's. Today we more clearly see the priest as the one who stands at the center of the gathered community, leading its sacramental worship, ministering to its needs. The current diaconate is the restoration of the ancient, full, and equal order of ministry, based on the call to imitate Christ in service to the poor and needy. The deacon stands at the edge of the gathered community as a bridge to the world, "to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world . . . and to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself." [BCP p. 543] This is quite different from the ministry of transitional deacons as well as the short-lived experience of perpetual deacons.

Perhaps most important, the current renaissance of the diaconate is part of the church recovering its own sense of diakonia, of being called and sent into the world to serve. Education continues to be needed to ease the tensions and concerns of presbyters and bishops, and to inform the laity of the varied and distinct ministries of deacons. For the church to move ahead in the third millennium it will need scores of called, dedicated, well-trained and passionate deacons to bring the word of Christ to all people, to interpret to the church the needs of the world, and to restore the early church's understanding of diakonia to all the baptized.

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