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Deacon as Learner
and Mentor
for Today's Church

by

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Deacon as Learner and Mentor for Today's Church

by John W Willets

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When I was ordained deacon, I had not focused much on the ordinal nor the promises I made to the church. I spent a lot of time focusing on the requirements for ordination, especially the content areas required by canons. Among other things, I knew about church history and homiletics, about theology and ethical reflection, about scripture and church polity. I studied much, remembered some, and was ordained thinking now I was ready to be a deacon. At this point I had not begun to think about promising to:

1. study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model my life upon them.
2. make Christ and his redemptive love known, by my word and example, to those among whom I live, and work, and worship.
3. interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.
4. assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and
5. carry out other duties assigned to me from time to time, and
6. show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.

(Book of Common Prayer, *Ordination of a Deacon*, ECUSA, pp 537-547.)

I had not realized that there was a connection between all the canonical content areas I learned and tests I passed and the promises I make. Now I think if I contextualized my learning of the content areas and grounded that knowledge in the ordination promises, I would have retained much more and saved a lot of time making the connections through reflection and abstraction that followed later. In each of these promises, seemingly secreted away, were the competences I had to develop as a deacon of the church. While I am not familiar with all the promises made by the various denominations represented at our conference, I know that each of us were ordained or consecrated or set apart in some special service that recognized the ministry of a deacon and, in that service—or during it—promises are made that are identical or similar to the ones I made and listed above. I encourage all of you to go back to your promises and see if you ground your ministries in them. See if you live up to them.

Look closely at the promises and note that some of them are promises about myself, my own learning, my own life, and others are about the lives of all who comprise the body of Christ. Another way to think about this is that some are personal competences and some are corporate competences. For example, I can study Holy Scripture by myself, but I will not have the same richness of experience nor complexity nor texture of meaning that I have when I engage in study with other serious-minded Christians who

struggle to make meaning for their spiritual development or for their ministries. Therefore, I need the personal competence of critical thinking and the corporate competence of collaboration. Likewise, to make Christ's redemptive love known by my word and example requires me to develop personal competences of living the Word and the corporate competence of making Christ known through my words. It is one thing to show Christ by example and another to make Christ known through the use of words and my promise is to do both. In fact, I remember reading somewhere, I think in some work of Verna Dozier, that unless I make Christ's redemptive love known by word as well as example, others may simply see my life and think me peculiar or more peculiar than I am. But to be able to convey my example in actions *and words* makes crystal clear that my life is grounded in Christ and not just personal peculiarity.

Having come to realize that ministry is about the development of personal and corporate competences, I must now rethink the canonical content I spent so much time learning and contextualize what I learned in the process of ministry. At the same time, I came to understand that I have a personal diaconate, that is the ministry to which I am called as a member of the body of Christ, but I have an ordained public ministry of deacon and animator of diaconal gifts. I have a personal responsibility to develop the diaconal ministries of others so that together we are the church, building the Kingdom of God and reconciling what is broken, torn down, separated, to God and to each other. In other words, I am still governed by my baptismal covenant and it is not suspended by my ordination promises, but I added onto my baptismal covenant the responsibilities of being a deacon, called by the church to show the church how to be deacon and equip the church to be deacon so that the church can live into the diaconate of Christ. Until I came to this understanding, I thought I was responsible for being deacon and doing diaconal ministry and that others were off the hook. This change in perspective came after I reread and digested the meaning of my ordination promises. This perspective was an aha experience. It happened when I was reading the ordinal many months after ordination and thinking about my promises, especially number six above: *show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.*

It dawned upon me that the use of the third person plural pronoun, *they*, meant that all of us have the responsibility of diakonia. What fell into place as much as the realization that we are called to diaconal ministry is the realization that we also called to presbyteral ministry. Ordained deacons and priests are animators of the ministries to which all the Holy People of God are called. We are asked to show through word and example how the church is obligated to ministry and our ministries are simply an extension of our baptismal promises. Ordination obligates the ordained to show and equip all God's Holy People to be extensions of Christ's ministry. Priests show how to be presbyteral, how to make sacramental the events of our lives through an incarnational engagement with God in all that we touch and experience. To show us how to gather a community, how to nurture relationships, how to be pastor and gatherer. Deacons show how to be diaconal, how to serve, work, and live exemplary lives dedicated to God's word through the study of Scripture, to make Christ's redemptive love known, and to work for justice and peace, reconciling the world to God and to one another. Deacons call us to the world to see, identify, and interpret the signs of the times and perform the work of prophetic interpretation. I discovered a context for my ministry, for my service, and an insight into the competences, both personal and corporate, that I need for myself and that I need to help others develop. I need to be a learner and

teacher, I need to be a servant and equipper, and I need to clearly model servant ministry to God's people so they can recognize and assume the diaconal role in the world. I discovered my identity as a deacon.

As a learner, I ground myself in a model for learning exemplified by the Road to Emmaus story in Luke's version of the Good News (24:13-35). In this model, Jesus meets two on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They do not recognize him. That's always my starting point. I begin a journey and in the journey I usually do not recognize Jesus at first. But these three begin a journey of about seven miles and on the way they are influenced by Jesus' teaching. He asks them what has happened, what are the current events, that they are discussing as they walk along. Does he not ask us this same question over and over in our own journeys? They immediately tell him about their understanding of Jesus, a prophet mighty in word and deeds and the things that have happened to him in the past few days. But Jesus says there is more to the story. Jesus joins them on their journey and as they walk together, sharing their conversation, listening and speaking, thinking and feeling, Jesus instructs them quietly and with insight and meaning. Jesus makes clear the events and meaning of his own life that have already been revealed beginning with Moses and the prophets and by interpreting the stories he enlightens them, thrills them, makes their hearts warm with comprehension. As the time passes and they arrive, they invite Jesus for dinner. He accepts. They go inside. When he blesses the food, they recognize him and immediately he disappears. Is that not our relationship? He comes quietly, unrecognizable, and instructs in the Word, shared with others through conversation and journeying. Often we recognize him and he immediately disappears.

This is the basis of my understanding of Jesus grounded in the way I learn. I love the journey, I love the conversation, I am warmed in my heart when meaningful things are shared, and I almost always recognize the presence of Jesus in the momentary revelations that generously emerge from the conversations, the meals together, the journeying together, and the corporate nature of being a part of the church. And even after that recognition, just as Cleopas and the other—I like to think it was his wife—ran to tell others of their experience, I hang back a little and listen to see if the conversation invites me to talk about my experiences of Jesus' presence in my life. What a story! What a fit! In this story as deacon charged to interpret to the church the hopes needs and concerns of the world, I discover the world, its concerns, its needs and I'm ready with prophetic voice interpreting the signs of the times to the church.

There are papers, perhaps a book, in the process I just outlined as a learner. Grounded in the Kolb model of experiential learning, the emerging competences result from the meaning-making activities of reflection, abstraction, and experimentation. An equally important influence to my own learning comes from the work of Paulo Freire, Daniel Schipani, and Gustavo Gutierrez and the liberation theology movement. Also, the influence of Howard Thurman and Myles Horton and his work at the Highlander Center, an important center for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, both helped me to establish a working model for justice and peace. I will not use this venue to venture into so many if these ideas in any exhaustive way, but I feel obligated to cite them for those who may want to investigate them further. In the papers I hope will follow this one, I will return to these ideas in a more systematic engagement. For now though, I want to turn to the idea of deacon as mentor.

I ground my experience of mentoring in the touchstone story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). What is particularly attractive about this story for this purpose is how Philip approaches the eunuch. He comes making no assumptions and asks the question, "Do you know what you are reading?" Equally important is the eunuch's response. Whether he knew or thought he knew, what he was reading, he asked a question back, "How can I unless someone guides me?" What a unusual, marvelous, and important difference is expressed in these questions. The relationship does not begin with any assumptions, there is little difference between the teacher and the learner, and the engagement begins, not with answers nor opinions, but with questions. This is a natural setup for anyone committed to lifelong learning. There is an overtly apparent humility assumed by mentor and learner. Before the learning begins, there is an invitation. Luke tells us, "And he invited Philip to get in [the chariot] and sit beside him."

As an adult educator and more than casual observer of human interaction, I am struck by how different this process begins than the way most of us engage in learning. Often we assume there needs to be an expert who tells us what we need to know, someone with the answers. But learning and mentoring works best when the teacher and learner both see themselves in a learning process. When the focus of the learning activities resides in learning rather than teaching, the outcome of the relationship is richer and layered with complexity. When the learning process is motivated by mutual enrichment, when the environment is sustained by learning rather than teaching, then mentoring becomes a relationship based on mutual respect and equality. It seems to me that is exactly how the story portrays Philip and the eunuch. Philip is invited into the chariot and they, as in the journey story of Emmaus, journey on, talking, and engaging with the ideas, the scripture, and with each other. As in the common human experience, they discover that this kind of relationship results in transformation. The transformative event for the eunuch is evidenced by his question, what prevents me from being baptized? More akin to Mark than Luke, the story continues immediately with the baptism performed by Philip using roadside water. Whereupon, Philip, like Jesus in Emmaus, disappears from the scene and the mentor, like Philip realizes the mentoring relationship comes to an end and it is time to move on. The Holy Spirit's gain is the eunuch rather than Philip.

Given the process I just described, what is the connection for the deacon? It occurs to me, as in the case of my own discovery that my ministry is intimately connected to my ordination promises, that the ministries of the baptized must be intimately connected to the promises made during baptism. While there are five of them, these three are significantly diaconal:

- We will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- We will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves?
- We will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Book of Common Prayer, Baptismal Covenant, pp 305-306

It is not likely that any particular deacon can mentor everyone into all these promises, but at any given time, any may be asked to mentor someone into any of these promises. As a learner, I am then responsible to be informed about and to be equipped with as many of the competencies that underlie these promises as I can. Also as a member of the baptized, I am responsible for living into these promises, and therefore I am also a learner on the way with respect to them. A mentor needs to be competently grounded in order to mentor. It may be that the mentor recommends or turns over someone to another mentor who possesses the skills and gifts of any particular promise. However, in all cases, the mentor as well as the person being mentored are on a path of learning together. Epistemic humility demands that we remember that none of us are perfect in our knowledge nor the practice of our gifts, each of us has more to learn, none of our skills are without flaw, and it is therefore in the mutuality of the journey that both mentor and those being mentored grow and are transformed. At the end of the day, we are brought to the realization that continual learning requires continual practice.

- The best learning is contextualized in the journey.
- The deacon has an enormous job that depends on collaboration and development of community.
- The development of community is a natural outgrowth of learning.
- Learning is enhanced and made texturally rich through collaboration.
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In my role as faculty at School for New Learning (DePaul University), I am the faculty champion for collaborative learning. I have grown to regard collaboration not so much as a skill as it is a way of life, a way of being. Perhaps this is informed by my engagement with Freire and Schipani. In his critique of Freire, Schipani notes that:

...Freire easily adopts a position which easily turns into indoctrination. Human freedom cannot be cultivated if people are induced or conditioned to assume the political option of pedagogical facilitators. The educational process may be seriously compromised when its validity is predicated on the prior commitment of a certain kind of radical or revolutionary change. The dynamics of alienation are believed to be so strong, and the resistance of the oppressors so insidious and powerful, that conscientization should necessarily lead most people to revolutionary involvement and praxis... this position can easily generate messianic and authoritarian educational patterns which violently frustrate the creative and liberating process of conscientization. That accounts for, among other things, the frequent failure to recognize and tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence, and for what Freire himself calls "absence of doubt" and the closing of oneself into "circles of certainty." ...

Schipani, p 24.

I believe we are in the midst of our unique application of these ideas. Whereas Freire wrote from the perspective of the oppressed, I now borrow his ideas from the perspective of the privileged. I live and work among people of privilege. Regardless of the perspective, learning requires a collaborative process or meaning-making cannot be as rich, as textured, nor as creative without the benefit of collaboration.

Let me give a concrete example of these ideas. Working among the privileged, I find that the hopes, needs and concerns of the world where I live are grounded in our insatiable desire for power and our fear of losing it. I marvel, for instance, in our declaration of war following 9/11. Never was an event so filled with an opportunity for reflection and meaning-making. From the perspective of collaborative process, never was

a society so united in the possibility of caring concern for one another—a setup for collaboration. Instead of investigating the question of why anyone would do this to us, we responded with the very force and power that continued the violence into the lives of other innocent people in Afghanistan and Iraq creating for them an experience of injustice not dissimilar from the flaming towers in New York City and we called their misery collateral damage. That some of the wicked perish is of no consequence in the streams of violence and the fear and hatred it ensures. As in all ethical systems with which I am familiar and certainly within the ethical context of our Christian tradition, the end did not justify the means. Indeed we have generated “...authoritarian educational patterns...” with no tolerance for ambiguity nor ambivalence. We live in a culture of “absence [from] doubt” about what we did, and we enclosed ourselves into a “circle of certainty.” This is a diaconal problem and as deacons we are called to interpret to the church the hopes, needs and concerns of the world in which we live and work. We need to give voice to this injustice and we need to work to develop all the baptized into a sense of Christian love. Like most diaconal work, this is an enormous undertaking.

Let me give one more concrete example of the application of these ideas. Each Sunday I stand at the altar and look out at the Holy People of God. I know that everyone present has a theology of faith. I also know that many are unable to articulate their faith in a way that proclaims the Good News. I encounter ordinary folks who want to live a good life and be good persons and believe that all they have to do is to believe. From a deacon’s perspective there is more to be done. If we fail to act on our beliefs, we are simply armchair revolutionaries. Reading, learning from, and converting our belief about the scriptural stories into action (ministry) is one of the reasons we come together in community. These same, profoundly radical, scriptural stories hold the potential for our personal liberation, but also for the liberation of our communities.

...By adopting a liberation hermeneutic, the experts or specialists in biblical interpretation—scholars, pastors, and teachers [to which I add deacons]—are also emancipated from prejudice and privilege and are freed to become useful and faithful resources for the sake of God and the people. The “teachers of the Word” thus become facilitators and servants (rather than rulers and controllers); they become co-learners and copilgrims together with the people... In the words of David Lockhead the intuition of what the text means in context is ultimately not a matter of expertise, but, rather, a matter of creative insight. Schipani, p 172.

This same liberation hermeneutic not only provides the basis for our individual response to our faith through action, it is the essence of ministry and the essence of proclamation through word and example. It is through this community action and response to it, that we assist in the building of the Kingdom of God.

When I was asked to present these ideas at the TEND conference, I wanted to be contemporary and ground the presentation in practice. I suppose that is because I spend my life in the application of knowledge. For me that is the essence of competency, that we ground our action in our continual learning. Kolb calls this active experimentation. (Kolb, 1999) Regardless of what we call it, the activity of putting what we know into use is not just a pragmatic expression of one’s life, it is the essence of transformation. Transformation of ourselves and of the world around us. As an Episcopalian I claim my faith is grounded in scripture, tradition, and reason. It is the creative tension of these polarities that informs my ministry, that is, my ministry as a member of the Holy People of

God and my ministry as a deacon, called by the Holy Spirit and affirmed by the church. As a deacon, I am called to serve and to remind the church of its call to service. Christ commissioned the church to go into the world as servants and lovers of God and humanity. As animators of servant ministry, we are here to help the Holy People of God live into its calling.

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