



## **The Role of the Deacon in the 21st Century**

Archdeacon and Director's Conference: Open Space Notes - Spring 2014

*Every year, AED convenes a large group of Archdeacons and Deacon Directors for a professional learning lab. Using [Open Space Technology](#) methods to shape the discussion, these experts in diaconal formation and management of deacon programs provide peer review of adaptations made in their local programs, or raise timely issues for general discussion. Discussion notes are kept. These "Open Space Notes," while often written informally, provide the best and most recent thinking on a variety of diaconal theological and management challenges by a body of experienced deacons with a wealth of knowledge. Names listed are those of the Conveners. Contact information to initiate further discussion may often be located in the [Directory of Deacons](#) published by AED annually.*

### **Facilitator: Lou Thibodaux (Alabama)**

Scribe: Jan Grinnell (Rhode Island)

The Diocese of Alabama wants to provide their bishop with research-based based results of how deacons in leadership understand the role of the deacon in the 21st. century. This is part of a two-pronged effort with data collected from archdeacons in a paper survey followed by Open Space discussion among archdeacons and program directors.

The discussion was framed around two questions:

1. What kind of changes are we seeing in the 21st century that impact the larger church
2. How are deacons responding to these changes?

Perrin (Long Island) Second axial age (First is when Christ was born) - massive changes in fundamental ways of interacting - including electronic

McNally- (Minnesota)- studied historical liturgy - we have emerged into missional church - based on Baptism - all called into mission - this is the shift in the church -

Phyllis Tickle - Emergent Church - off shoots emerge - we are beginning to see gatherings at Starbucks, pub churches - etc.

Young people are not joiners of traditional ways - BUT do get online etc.

Church needs to learn to be different

Perrin (Long Island) - I got into the Diaconate because our focus is outward; church grew up in was inward - welcoming, etc. But did not go out! We have not been "out there" as others. I am working on them getting out and getting the church to know the local people - leaders, etc.

Grewell- (Diocese of Olympia) - charge by the bishop (commission) - 'Outside Church Walls' -



they have a blog of a study of the last year. What are the six words you think of? if you are the six words you are not the church what are the six words you think of. Now going out and asking what is needed.

(Name?) Diocese of LA - see different angle - driven theological and financially - much more 24/7 understanding of what church is. As church's budgets have fallen find ways to make campus and facilities open to other groups. Along with this has come a sense of church is not who shows up on Sunday morning - but people who come to the Wednesday food distribution where there is a worship service before food is disbursed. No longer just record Sunday morning attendance, but who comes for other kinds of events

Minnesota - bishop on visitations ask vestry if I am going to stop at local gas station, will they know where you are and what you are doing

Struther (West Coast of Canada) - people say they are spiritual and not religions - recommend book Cascadia, written by Douglas Todd

(Name?) Diocese of MI - rural churches are dying and closing, no solution yet. One church has \$30,000 budget not making it - but \$160k business (day shelter? Medical clinic?) operating in the basement. Having to look outside the church to find ways to respond to this (ie. supporting a thriving mission without funding from the parish)

Hawley (Oregon) - church is people not the building. Deacons play critical role in transforming church to understand that we are the people. Answer is not that we take the liturgy outside the church.

(Name?) It's not enough to simply take liturgy out of the building. It's about forming people via liturgy to become the church.

Perrin (Long Island) In Brooklyn there are several old church buildings where built by wealthy Episcopalians - buildings there, but wealthy people not there. Small congregations and building is falling apart. Bushwick Abbey - Episcopal church that meets in a bar - sign outside that says 'A Church that Doesn't Suck' Another is St. Lydia's - everyone gathers together, set table, have meal, clean up later - but it is not a Eucharist as we would look at

Bennett- (Nebraska) - looking at three strands of things involving dying and grief - little towns that are dying and churches with them. Function of agriculture changing. They know that they are dying as a church. Hospice type of ministry that are ministering to them. Climate change - huge worry because they are agricultural and we will be looking at relief efforts and spiritual crisis. Towns shrinking, towns dying, and global changes. As deacons we need to figure out what the good news is in all of this and take it to the world.

Mills-Curran (Mass.) - church building is 1956 A frame building. has 18 classrooms. Covered with solar panels. Part of Interfaith Power and Light - now sell power to others.



Richards (Central Gulf Coast) A retired EFM mentor wanted to continue similar discussions after EFM ended. Ask local bar if they could meet there with a beer and a burger and their discussions. Others joined.

Solbak (Central PA) - transitional deacon sitting on street corner in DC and writes in blog, and just there with her collar; if she doesn't show up kids ask where she is

Grinnell (Rhode Island) - God on the Go - Univ of RI campus - Ashes to Go, Feed a Friend (home cooked meals once a month) - God love you is the message

Olympia - daffodils with note that God loves you

### **How are deacons responding?**

Mills-Curran (Mass.) I think that deacons are pre-adapted for emergent church - we are to continue to model for the church that we do things without a budget

Two chaplains for Occupy Church - adults are trying trying to understand how to make a living from the desire to serve; wanted to give whole life to service not a building

In some emerging communities - deacons are dispensable, need a priest for liturgy, but not a deacon. St. Gregory in San Francisco - Assign a lay person every week to serve as deacon.

Perrin (Long Island) one thing to be important for all of us to do along lines of baptismal covenant - baptism makes us ministers - but we need education to be effective - we think people don't want church history, etc. There are some who want to know why things are the way they are - church history, etc. The church in the 20th century was invested in keeping the people ignorant so rector would have the power. This is not going to work in the Information Age. We need to realize this. The education should be at the congregational level so lay people can go out with a certain amount of confidence about the Bible and the church. Ordained people should be support system for lay people.

Response to above: EFM is an option for educating the laity more deeply.

Nesbit (Penna.) - we are an ordered church, we may have arguments for should we be or not. But call comes from baptismal covenant. Priests say this about deacons, but not priests. Are we a sacrament dispensing service? But the diaconal call of the church gets ignored for its purpose because of the sacraments. Part of the reason why we have ordained deacons is to take the church to the world.

Mills-Curran - Diakonia is why church is getting younger. Her church welcomed Brazilians and grew with other Anglos who were looking for someone to speak this invitation.

(Name?) We are seeing a trend towards domestic missions to the rural areas. This is where people are encouraged to go to a smaller church with the idea of walking along with them. Big



churches are giving to smaller churches by being involved with them.

Thibodaux (Alabama) I'm seeing the same trend in cities. Birmingham was started to produce steel. Affluent people were on one side of mountain and others on other side of mountain. A program (pre-school partners) started church members at St. Luke's - going over to the mountain in more industrial side (Asset Based, etc. ) Country club people walking with industrial.

Solbak (Central PA) - small church in Central PA where bishop went for visitation and saw 12 people at the service. The part time priest said after - "now we will go across the street". (The parish owned a building across the street) - that's where 60 members of the church were feeding 100 people on that Sunday.

Let's not throw out the liturgical baby with the bath water. Campus of USC - kids want liturgy

Bishop of Los Angeles rides in gay pride parade and do a street liturgy during the gay pride parade.

If you want different ideas for liturgy look at Prayer Book of West Indies

Root of word liturgy is 'work of the people'

(Name?) Dallas - We have a program called 167. - this is a concept that 168 hours in the week, and what do you do with the other 167. The idea has caught on. Activities are organized to handle other hours, and have badges that say 167 - activities. Coordinated activities all week long

Taize is a good way to reach out to young people. Another idea is Sunday night Compline service - this is done in Olympia. Pews are filled and kids laying on the floor.

Thibodaux (Alabama) - has to be grounded in 5 marks of mission - proclaim good news - our sacraments and faith link us to Jesus - But the language of the 5 marks is missing any reference to Jesus. We are becoming so mission-focused and we are not reminding others that our faith is in Jesus.

We as Deacons need to do more introspection. Our message is servant ministry, and this is ministry of Jesus. It is sacramental. we need to preach this where when we go out we become the sacred.

Dismissal by one Deacon - "Our worship has ended, our service now begins."

Thibodaux (Alabama) Strategically pick your battles - It's not just about securing funding for mission. in the church budget. It's about having all the people know that they are involved in God's mission.

Deacons need to be linked to a parish - not just 'the world'.