



What might a healthy relationship look like between a Seminary and Diaconal Formation?

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.

Lead by Diane D’Sousa, Director of Lifelong Learning at EDS

Scribed by: Geri Swanson, deacon. Saturday, March 30, 2014

Additional notes: Maureen Hagen, deacon

There are deacons who already hold some sort of seminary degree: M Div, MA, D Min are just some examples. There are also deacons who hold undergraduate and graduate degrees in a variety of subjects, some of whom hold PhD’s in a variety of fields. On the other hand, there are deacons who possess only a high school diploma.

Currently deacons in the Episcopal Church USA are formed by local formation programs in a variety of ways that cover in various ways, the five areas of ministry competencies that include:

1. Academic studies including Holy Scripture, theology and the traditions of the church
2. An understanding of diakonia (the diaconate)
3. Human awareness and understanding
4. Spiritual development and discipline
5. Practical training and experience

There are a variety of ways these competencies are currently being met and evaluated.

The possibility of seminaries providing part or all of diaconal training was discussed with the pros and cons discussed as follows:

1. Most felt that the seminaries need to understand that deacons or those in formation to become deacons are often non-traditional students who work full time and have varying degrees of academic preparation.
2. Diaconal formation courses need to be affordable for the students taking them. The question arose about who would be paying for the training. Some training programs



- are funded by the diocese, by the parish that raises the deacon up, or by the students themselves.
3. Would the seminaries be open to having deacons on their Board of Directors?
 4. Would deacons be teaching some of the classes, especially those around the understanding of the diaconate?
 5. Would the credits earned result in a seminary endorsed certificate? Could the credits be used towards a degree, i.e. MA ?
 6. Would the seminaries offer only the foundational courses in the academic areas of Scripture, theology and traditions of the church? Or would they broaden the scope?
 7. Will online courses and other forms of distance learning be included as part of the curriculum
 8. Deacons and diaconal formation students do not live in academic time. They have time constraints around vacation time and family responsibilities.
 9. Some expressed concerns over “intellectual snobbism” of some institutions of higher learning; others expressed concerns that some seminaries may be looking at deacon programs as a solution to some of their financial struggles.
 10. Some deacons who attended or are currently attending seminary shared their experiences. Most agreed that the institutions did not really understand what their call was or was solely focused on the formation of priests, which is what they do. It is hoped that more exposure of deacons and/or diaconal aspirants will improve the institutional understanding of what deacons, not transitional deacons, bring to the theological table.
 11. Will there be opportunities for Continuing Education hours with course work taught through a diaconal lens?
 12. A deacon formation director is involved in cross-orders formation and has found it fruitful in offering opportunities for shared work.

Highlighting strengths of collaboration and challenges:

- Deacons as an eye-opener to the seminary community (students and faculty)
- Personal relationships; colleagues in ministry
- An appreciation of a deacon as different from a transitional deacon
- My (deacon's) commitment: to do my seminary work through a diaconal lens
- Strengthen my diaconal formation
- Allowed me to undertake better what being a deacon means for me.
- Most of the world is unaware that the diaconal lens exists
 - (What is unique: being out and functioning in the world...)
 - and how we are all enriched by that view and work
- the life skills of mature students with profession and life experiences
- common experience and expertise in field placement as part of formation
- collaboration - deacons on faculty is not common, but would be appreciated
- deacons bring up different issues in classes (e.g. history of diaconate in state, different types of deacons)



- Jesus is alive and working in the world >> the deacon acts to bring that good news back into the church
- Cross-order: forming lay/deacons/priests together
- An opportunity to go to seminary – timing of classes
- I want seminary to be worth my time: I don't want to be the sole teacher re: deacons
- Would seminary have a deacon on its ... board ... teaching staff?
- Deacons doing teaching on transitional deacons...
- Are priests threatened by deacons going to seminary? Those not paid having same qualifications = fear
- Seminaries set up and prepared to teach theology, scripture, tradition. Can they accommodate working people? Are they affordable?
- We want seminaries to know what we (deacons) are
- Residential requirements are challenging
- Diversity within deacons: some academically gifted and prepared, some less so
- Studies => accredited in seminaries. That can be useful for chaplaincy.
- Deacons who want to be chaplains need half courses to be accredited
- Could online courses be open to deacons?
- Needs of deacons: in a job that they need to keep
- Seminary classes can be applied to deacon formation
- Know who each other is/who deacons are
- Creative solution to residency: like the Diocese of South Ohio, one might fly professor in at beginning and end of online program
- Creative solutions and pedagogically sound to online learning
- Teaching of collaboration online and video conferencing
- Flexibility in vision in recognizing experience and credentials
- Recognizing the academic vision/voice/theology/story of the deacons
- Listening to all our calls together
- A team approach to working together
- Continuing education in collaboration with deacons as teachers
- Great quality teachers
- Continuity in fulfilling requirements

Challenging aspects of a relationship:

- Never feeling part of ...
- What's a deacon?
- "I used to be what you are"
- do you have the "chops" to do the work?
- "your vocation is unclear"
- "non traditional"
- less than a priest
- 'classism" (omnivorous presbyterate)
- assuming I'm a priest



- people not curious about me/diaconate
- seminary: a place to form priests
- seminary: being marketed to
- are my/our needs heard (evening classes...)
- revenue stream
- destroyed the program
- lack of respect and transparency
- not important
- doesn't fit in calendar
- patronizing
- experience doesn't count
- our theology is invisible
- academic snobbism – assumptions

And finally: Part of what we are visioning is not born yet.