

THE VOCATIONAL DIACONATE

Introduction

“During this period, when disciples were growing in number, a grievance arose on the part of those who spoke Greek, against those who spoke the language of the Jews; they complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The Twelve called the whole company of disciples together and said ‘It would not be fitting for us to neglect the word of God in order to assist in the distribution. Therefore, friends, pick seven men of good repute from your number, men full of the Spirit and of wisdom, and we will appoint them for this duty; then we can devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ This proposal proved acceptable to the whole company. They elected Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, along with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch, who had been a convert to Judaism, and presented them to the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them.” Acts 6:1-6

Thus was born, in the earliest days of the Church, that order of the ordained ministry which came to be called the order of deacons. These first deacons provide the model for what we would today call “permanent deacons”, that is persons ordained to the diaconate order, not as a “stepping stone” to the priesthood, but with the intention of serving the remainder of their lives as deacons, having a permanent place as such in the structure of the Church.

Although in recent times the prevailing practice in this diocese has generally been to ordain to the diaconate only those persons who expect and are expected sometime thereafter to be ordained to the priesthood, Bishop Salmon, after consultation with a committee especially appointed to consider the matter, concluded that it would be good to open the diaconate in this diocese to men and women who would serve permanently in the role of deacons, generally on a non-stipendiary basis, earning their livelihood by continuing in their preordination careers.

The Ministry of All the Baptized

Our English word **deacon** and its cognates **diaconate** and **diaconal** are derived from the Greek, *diakonos*, meaning “servant”. Thus it is that we may use the term “diaconal ministry” in the Church to describe the servant ministry of Christians as they reach out to help others – both those within and those outside the Church – with their spiritual and material needs. The model for this diaconal ministry is the Lord Jesus Christ, who described himself as the Son of Man who came, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a

ransom for many (Mark 10:45). “I am among you”, he told his followers, “as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

Who is called to this diaconal ministry? There can be no serious question about it: all baptized Christians are commissioned by Christ to share with him in his diaconal ministry. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 makes it clear that all of us have roles to carry out in feeding the hungry, extending hospitality to the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and the imprisoned. As the incarnate Lord, during his earthly life, was among his contemporaries, as “one who serves,” so we today, as the Church, are among our contemporaries as the very Body of him who continues to serve through us. The Rev. John E. Booty, in his book *The Servant Church*, expressed it this way: “The Church is the whole people of God engaged in the primary ministry of service and this is true because they are the body of Christ the Servant.”

The Ordained Ministries

In the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, there is a section entitled, “The Ministry” (BCP, pages 855–856). The first question in this section asks, “Who are the ministers of the Church?”, and the answer is that there are four categories of ministers: lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons. The next four questions ask about the nature of each of these four categories, and the answers to those questions all begin with the same words “The ministry of _____ is to represent Christ and his Church....” Below are the opening words of each of these four answers:

“The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church....”

“The ministry of a bishop is to represent Christ and his Church, *particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese....*”

“The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, *particularly as pastor to the people....*”

“The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, ***particularly as a servant of those in need....***”

Notice that the descriptions of the three categories of the ordained ministry all have a qualifying clause beginning with the word “*particularly*”. Ministers in these three categories are ordained to carry out particular roles. And notice especially the difference between the role of a priest and the role of a deacon. The priest is a pastor to the people of the Church, presiding as the congregation gathers for worship and overseeing the management of parochial life from day to day. The deacon, on the other hand, has a different focus to his or her ministry. That focus is upon those in need, and this focus has generally been understood to include both those within and those outside the Church.

As the preface to the Ordination Rites (BCP, page 510) tells us, it is “a special responsibility of deacons to minister in Christ’s name to the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the helpless.”

The Diaconate as a Permanent Vocation

Bishop Grein of the Diocese of New York has said that the renewal of the diaconate – the ministry of ordained deacons – as a permanent vocation is a pet project of his. He notes that there are those in the Church who fear that such a renewal would be:

“a move away from the very important, current trend of stressing the ministry of all the baptized. They say it represents a re-emphasis of an already too strong clericalism. Yet I do not see the renewal of the diaconate as working against the establishing of a strong lay ministry – quite the contrary, it is essential to it. In accordance with the natural rhythm of the Church’s life of gathering and sending, the local priest is the one who gathers Christ’s people. As pastor, the priest is the shaper and nurturer of the community. In one sense, the priest represents the Church’s ministry to itself – the building up of the Body of Christ through liturgy, education and spiritual formation.”

“But the deacon is the symbol of the Church’s concern for a servant ministry to the world – he or she leads the community as Christ sends it, into mission. The deacon represents the interface between Church and world. As it says in the bishop’s exhortation to the candidate for the diaconate in the ordination service – *You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.... At all times, your life and teachings are to show Christ’s people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.* Is not this the primary kind of ministry we are trying to encourage when we speak of ‘the ministry of the laity’?

“To a degree, our problem with the establishment of a vital ministry of the laity has been that of role model. For most people ministry means ‘priestly ministry,’ and therefore ministry connected with the Church gathered. If we as a Church are serious about the ministry of the laity, and if by that we mean a full ministry including the mission of sending, then we need to have another role model together with the priest – namely the deacon.”

This function as a role model is worthy of special emphasis. As an ordained person, the deacon has a special leadership role within the Church – not to preside as the congregation gathers for worship, and not to oversee the management of parochial life from day to day – but, by precept and example, to inspire, prepare, lead, and support other Christians in their own servanthood ministries. As is the case with any ordained person, the deacon is ordained for ministry to the Church. In the case of a deacon, not only does that ministry

include service to those in need within the church, but of equal, and perhaps greater importance, it includes as well the function of leading the laypersons of the Church in their individual and corporate ministries to each other and to those outside the Church.

The Place of the Deacon in the Diocesan Structure

From the earliest days of the Church, deacons have been in close relationships with their bishops, as the special representatives of their bishops in the Church's servant ministry. Even today, although deacons may be, and usually are, associated with a particular parish or institution, their real base is in the diocese, and they serve directly under the bishop's authority. This direct relationship with the bishop is a constant reminder that the deacon's ministry is not limited in its focus to an individual parish, but also looks outward to society as a whole.

An idea sometimes encountered in those dioceses which do not yet have vocational deacons is that the deacon's role is primarily as a parish assistant or a second-order clergy person who is given charge of some small, marginal congregation. But this is in no way the role which vocational deacons will have in The Anglican Diocese of South Carolina. Here they will not replace or be substitutes for either lay leaders or other ordained persons. Rather, they will function precisely in the role described in the bishop's examination of the ordinand in the course of the ordination service (BCP page, 543):

“My brother, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. 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.

“As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model our life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.”

This “special ministry of servanthood directly under the bishop” will be an assigned ministry which will generally include, but not be limited to, direct service in the world outside the parish church. In some cases, this will be a ministry in which the individual had already been engaged prior to ordination (such as hospital visiting, hospice work, prison ministry, food kitchens, other ministries to the poor and the homeless, etc.). It is important to note in this connection, however, that it is the person, not the ministry, that is ordained.

That person is ordained as a deacon, a servant minister. If the ministry to which that person is initially assigned ends for any reason, he or she will take up a new ministry, assigned by the bishop, and continue to serve as a deacon in that new assigned ministry.

The deacon will also be assigned to a congregation for service under the supervision of the local priest. In this capacity, the deacon will perform the liturgical functions appropriate to the diaconate, such as reading the Gospel at the Eucharist and assisting in the ministration of the Sacrament to the people. The deacon may also be assigned to a teaching ministry in the local congregation and, when licensed by the Bishop, may be called upon from time to time to preach at the services of public worship. Such grounding in liturgy and congregational life will provide the spiritual context for the deacon's own ministry of service to those within and outside the Church and will, at the same time, facilitate the deacon's modeling of the servant ministry to the congregation and the carrying out of his or her role of inspiring, preparing, leading, and supporting members of the congregation in their own servant hood ministries.

A Witness of Grace and Truth

John Booty, in *The Servant Church*, states that such Anglican writers as Frederick Denison Maurice and Archbishop William Temple have taken note of the fact "that the ultimate truth about humanity is that we were all made for sacrificial service and that only through recovery of our servant nature will we find peace and happiness." Booty goes on to say about the ordained diaconate that "sacrificial service... is the law of human kind revealed in the sacrifice of Christ.... To be a deacon is to become more fully human and thus more fully the instrument of the divine. The way of self-denial (denial of selfishness) is the way of self-fulfillment (the affirmation of the ultimate value of life lived for others)."

The Deacon, the Bishop, the Parish, and the Diocese

A deacon is a person who is called by Christ, prepared and trained by His church, and ordained "to the special ministry of servant hood directly under your bishop" (Ordination of a Deacon, BCP, page 54). As an order of ministry in the church, deacons' lives and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.

While all Christians through their baptisms are called by God and His church to a servant ministry, following the example of Jesus, this is particularly true of deacons, and therefore they have a special relationship with their bishop. As the bishop is to hold up the apostolic faith to the church, so the deacon is to hold up our servant ministry to the church. The special bond between bishops in their role as "proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel" (Ordination of a Bishop, BCP, page 517) and deacons in their role "to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world" (Ordination of a Deacon, BCP, page 543), is crucial if the church is to fulfill her mission and ministry. It was to the whole world that God sent his Son (John 3:16). As the Body of Christ, the church exists to love the world as Christ loves the world.

Deacons bring the needs of the world to the church; bishops enlighten and stir up the church to answer their call “to serve as Christ served.

For these reasons, deacons serve under the direct authority of the bishop. Deacons are assigned to their diaconal ministries by the bishop, according to their special gifts and the needs of the communities which they serve. Their reassignment is subject to the bishop’s oversight. The special nature of the relationship of deacons to their bishop makes it imperative that they be accountable directly to the bishop.

Deacons may be assigned by the bishop to function liturgically and to minister sacramentally in congregations. These assignments are made with the concurrence of the rectors and vestries. A job description of the deacon’s duties and responsibilities will be negotiated by the bishop, the deacon, and the rector. While the ministries of deacons will always be non-stipendiary, job descriptions will specify any financial arrangements made for the services of deacons, such as reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses, continuing education, discretionary accounts, and administrative expenses. In ministering in a congregation, deacons are under the immediate supervision of the rector, and clear statements of the deacons’ duties will be communicated to the membership of the congregation. The assignment of deacons will be reviewed annually by the bishop, deacons, and rectors.

A deacon assigned to a parish must resign should the rector resign the cure. The deacon may be reassigned by the bishop to another congregation, or the deacon may be assigned to continue serving in the congregation during the interim under the direction of the bishop and clergy staff. A deacon will not be assigned as an interim in charge of a congregation during a vacancy. When a new rector is called, the deacon may be reassigned to that congregation by the bishop with the concurrence of the new rector and the vestry, in which case a new job description will be negotiated by the bishop, the deacon, and the new rector. Deacons will be covered by the deployment policies of the diocese as established for diaconal ministries. These policies will reflect the perceived needs of the wider society and the available gifts and talents of the deacons within the diocese. Deacons may be reassigned by the bishop as the needs of the situation are evaluated in light of the skills of the deacons.

Deacons may not be in charge of congregations nor may they accept chaplaincies in the armed forces of the United States.

Deacons speak to the church in the name of Jesus Christ about our service to all people, “particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely” (Ordination of a Deacon, BCP, page 543). Deacons bring their needs and concerns to the church assembled. In diocesan conventions of The Anglican Diocese of South Carolina, deacons shall be entitled to seats and voice but not votes. As non-voting participants in the councils of the church, the deacons speak to the church for the world. Once again, the deacons are witnesses to the ministry of servanthood and they identify with those persons in society who often lack power in places of decision making.

“Deacons are a sign of the church’s servant relationship to the world in and beyond the Christian community. The deacon turns the attention of the church to its ministry to the poor, the helpless, the afflicted, the unchurched – indeed the whole of humanity. The concerns of the diaconate are ones of justice, mercy, and charity in the broadest sense. The deacon enables the outward or missionary calling of the whole people of God. He or she is an effective sign of obedience to the dominical command to go out” (John Whittall, Dean of Students, Trinity College, University of Toronto).

The Personal Discernment Process

A faithful and complete discernment process is of course a very important and integral part of any validation of call to the ordained ministry. The church, recognizing her responsibility to equip all of her baptized members for the ministry to which each is called, of course seeks to do so with the guidance of both scripture and tradition. The training and support necessary for lay persons called to specialized ministries naturally differs from the training and support required for those who are called to service in Holy Orders as deacons. But nonetheless, perhaps one of the most important aspects of discernment is that it by nature must be one of prayerful consideration.

The church will encourage a clear understanding of the vocational diaconate itself, as outlined in this document and as stated in the most recent revisions of the Canons of the Diocese. The aspirant must first be clear about what the vocational diaconate is and what it is not. To this end, the church will encourage and may require extensive reading on the subject of the diaconate itself.

The church will encourage the seeking out of, or assignment to, an individual mentor (the parish priest, a “spiritual friend” etc.) to actively join the aspirant in seeking discernment. Mentors should be able to help aspirants explore and respond to their spiritual journeys of discernment, including a careful assessment of those gifts and talents which might be brought to the diaconate.

The Church’s Discernment Process

The Anglican Diocese of South Carolina takes the inner call of any aspirant very seriously. It recognizes however that a calling to the ordained ministry will come to fruition only if the inner call is accompanied by the validation of the church community. It is only in the new covenant community that the parameters of the vocation to the diaconate can be found. “The first step in understanding the nature of any Christian Ministry is to recognize the overwhelming agreement in virtually every tradition in the history of the church that a vocation to minister must be two-fold: it must be an inner call to the individual and it must be validated by the corporate body. Neither one, without the other, is sufficient. The second step is to appreciate the function and purpose of such ministry. The purpose of duly authorized regularizing, authenticating, or validating of such ministry is to insure that the ministry be truly the ministry, that it perform the function and purpose of its existence. The deacon is one form of this ministry

and shares with all other forms its final authenticity as the purpose of ministry is fulfilled....” (C. FitzSimons Allison).

The Diaconal Handbook and Guidelines for the Diocese of Lexington is helpful as it states:

“While affirming a universal vocation of ministry shared by all believers, the Episcopal Church’s tradition recognizes that some are called to a specific ministry which differs from an extension of the shared Christian ministry. The nature of that call originates in and is determined by the special function of the Church itself in relation to God’s reconciling purpose. Since the Church is the sacrament of the kingdom of God, then such offices as may exist within the Church must assist in the realization of the sacramental mission. This means that the three-fold ordained ministry (bishop, priest, deacon) is itself sacramental. It is a gift of the Spirit, a form of the divine presence. Therefore, no one can take it upon himself or herself to become a deacon, priest or bishop. Such a vocation can be undertaken only as a response to the divine initiating and only with the sanction of duly established authority. One cannot decide on the basis of his or her own desires or inclinations to assume an ordained ministerial office. It is not enough that one should feel called to such a position. The discernment of vocation is by persistent tradition a corporate as well as a personal matter. It is the right and duty of bishops, representing the Church, to select and admit aspirants for Holy Orders. In the exercise of this responsibility, the bishop will consult a variety of sources – the local parish’s or mission’s ministry committee, the rector or vicar, the vestry or bishop’s committee, the aspirant’s spiritual director, the diocesan Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee, physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, lay persons, and any other concerned persons – as to the potential of the aspirant.”

The actual journey from the inner call to the goal of ordination is a long and difficult one. **No one is guaranteed ordination at any stage of the process.** The church as a body must exercise a continuous process of discernment. The *Handbook on the Process Toward Ordination in the Diocese of Virginia* states:

“It is not useful to think of the various requirements... as “hurdles” or “hoops” as though they were obstacles which when successfully negotiated would leave one on a clear track to ordination. Fulfilling the requirements is a necessary, but by no means, sufficient consideration for ordination. The requirements are dry bones only, onto which flesh must be put and into which Spirit must be breathed. At any stage in the process the aspirant may realize that he or she was not, after all, called to ordained ministry, and may resign. There is no dishonor, and may be much wisdom, in such a decision. At any stage in the process the Bishop, Commission on Ministry, or others may decide that the call they thought was

to ordination was not, in fact, and permission to proceed may be withdrawn. There is no dishonor in that decision either, and one prays that it would be made in wisdom.”

All persons in The Anglican Diocese of South Carolina dealing with aspirants for ordination to the diaconate engage in this process through prayers and with deep concern for the welfare of both the aspirant and the church. Because persons are ordained for the good of the entire Body of Christ, the discernment of the validity of the call is a vitally serious matter.

When persons have engaged in a personal discernment process to the point that they feel moved to ask the church to join that discernment process, their intentions should be made known to the local priest and vestry. With the permission of the Bishop, a small parish discernment committee can then be organized for the purpose of weighing the proposed application, and the diocese can furnish materials illustrating the process and how such a committee is organized.

The committee will work with the applicant to weigh the specific gifts of the applicant, the experience of those gifts by the congregation, and the offering of those already recognized gifts and ministries to the church and world in a new way.

It is expected that the applicant will ordinarily already be living the life and doing the work of servant hood that is, doing diaconal ministry prior to entrance into Holy Orders. In most cases, applicants will be seasoned and mature persons who have grown into recognition and acceptance of their call to the diaconate and who have been recognized in their congregations for that ministry. Applicants will not ordinarily be recommended for postulancy on the basis of potential or general sense of call to servant hood into which they may grow during postulancy. Upon the completion of their work the committee will give the applicant, the priest, and the vestry a written summary of their findings.

The Formal Application Process

If after the completion of the two-fold discernment process (personal and congregational) there is agreement that formal application for ordination should be made to the diocese, that application process must follow and satisfy all the relevant provisions of the Constitution and Canons of the Diocese.

The Bishop’s office will answer questions and oversee the application process. Aspirants will submit all personal application forms required by the canons and by the diocese, including signified willingness for background checks to be conducted.

Aspirants will receive medical and psychological examinations at their own or sponsoring congregations’ expense, with the results of these examinations being forwarded to the bishop. Upon further review of the applications, the bishop may then extend invitations to applicants and spouses to meet with

the Commission on Ministry. The Commission on Ministry will then make recommendations to the bishop whether the applicants might be received as postulants. Those admitted to postulancy by the bishop may then enter into the prescribed course of study and preparation for ordination.

After no less than twelve months of postulancy and satisfactory progress, postulants may be admitted to the status of Candidate for Holy Orders, with the advice of the Commission on Ministry and the advice and consent of the Standing Committee.

After no less than twelve months of candidacy and further satisfactory progress, the bishop may take order for ordination to the diaconate, with the advice of the Commission on Ministry and the advice and consent of the Standing Committee.

Through out the entire process of discernment, application, and preparation for ordination, aspirants should continue to test and have tested their sense of call to and their level of preparation for the vocational diaconate. "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 5:22).