



Ordained Diaconate: A Narrowing of Ministry

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I oppose a permanent, ordained diaconate in American Lutheranism today. I'll make three preliminary statements and then marshal a summary of arguments.

What the issue is. “Deacons represent to the church its calling as servant in the world” (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, World Council of Churches, 1982, §31). “Diaconal functions are those that express the church’s calling as servant to God and in the world” (*The Study of Ministry*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991, §191). Arguments for an ordained diaconate in American Lutheranism mainly seek to relieve overworked clergy, to provide ordered recognition for associates in ministry (certified lay ministers), to recognize and nurture other lay workers in the life of the gathered community, and/or to represent or symbolize to all other laity their ministry in the world. A quick survey of history and contemporary proposals indicates that almost any Christian or ecclesiastical activity can be appropriate for the ordained deacon; usually, however, such deacons are “to exemplify the integration of worship and service” (*SM*, §191), or to “exemplify the interdependence of worship and service” (*BEM*, §31). Would American Lutheranism gain from introducing such an ordained office?

How we decide. Tradition, though it has a powerful voice, is not the determining authority. We are free to shape the forms of ministry for the needs of our day. Besides, traditions are wildly various on this subject, and one of the most important is 250 years of American Lutheran tradition without ordained deacons. Let’s agree on this assertion: we decide on the basis of what forms of ministry will best serve the gospel and the church’s mission to the world in our day.

What I favor. In the name of the gospel and that mission I strongly support any wise steps that will recognize, celebrate, and nurture the ministry of associates in ministry, other paid workers in the gathered church, and all lay people who serve helpfully in our common life of Christian community. But most of all I would support any wise steps that will recognize, celebrate, and nurture the ministry of the laity out there in the world beyond ecclesiastical life; this is most crucial for the church’s mission.

Why I am opposed to an ordained diaconate. Simply, it would not effectively serve

the ends just mentioned. If we start from an understanding of the church as the whole people of God called into mission, and if we take with dead seriousness the ministry of all the baptized people, then I would assert that an ordained diaconate will not be useful in our time and place for at least four reasons:

1. Above all, ordained examples of servant ministry will not provide an effective symbol for, nor an inspiring example to laity for that 90+% of ministry that takes place beyond ecclesiastical life in other areas of our secular society, such as family, work, recreation and entertainment, politics, economic decisions, community volunteer efforts, etc. And those are the areas where the gospel will make its way through faithful lay people, or else Christ's and the church's mission will falter.

It is unfortunate perhaps, but it is a basic fact that, when the church community (or ecclesiastical machinery) raises up a public, representative, official ministry (pastors, deacons, deaconesses, associates in ministry), the bulk of our laity will respect them but feel removed from them in terms of their own ministry—so great is the gulf between their church experience and their secular experience. There is no doubt that we need clergy thus marked to do our word and sacrament tasks. But the more that other church leaders can remain unmarked in this respect, the better their chances of serving the broadest ministry, and the whole sweep of the church's mission, both by their actions and by their example. To ordain a few deacons in each congregation will actually subvert the lay ministry of the many laity who have or need to discover their own servant role. Too many people will cheer the deacons on without seeing relevance for themselves.

2. Multiplying ordained offices at this time, given the traditions that are strong among us, will appear to most of us to be either needless bureaucracy or the next step in hierarchy, rather than the unfolding of the natural and traditional ordered life of the organic community, as some advocates maintain. It may take decades for this to change.

3. There are many practical problems. Two seem to me severe. So numerous and diverse are the ministries of our laity that ordained deacons as recognized examples of servanthood will inevitably focus on some types of ministry to the detriment of others. It would narrow our ideas of Christian service. That would be very bad. Conversely, ordaining some deacons to participate in leadership in corporate worship will result in a considerable drop-off of participation by many other laity in worship leadership.

4. The underlying problem is a basic misunderstanding of the church's two-phased nature (church/world, Sunday/Monday, gathered/scattered). No ordained officer of the church can represent that two-phased existence of the laity. Liturgy and daily life certainly need better connections. But to be believable, to signify and to communicate to our laity, the person who takes a role in our liturgical assembly and represents servant ministry must be one whose prime responsibility lies in the secular world.

Conclusion. Instead of ordaining a few deacons, we should, in every congregation, look for, raise up, recognize in the congregation, celebrate, and nurture every ministry in the secular world by every lay person whom the rest of the community can catch in the act, or who will tell us their tale.

Ordained Diaconate: A Renewal of Ministry

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The ELCA *Study of Ministry* offers this church an opportunity for renewal. An ordained

diaconate, embraced within the office of ministry, can provide a form of evangelical leadership among the whole people of God which enhances and expands our mission and ministry. A diaconate which is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related, and mission driven must be lived out in full partnership with pastors, bishops, and the baptized people of God.

Our understanding of ministry is inextricably linked to our understanding of what it means to be the church. The evangelical mission and the diaconal mission of the church are organically linked to and through the dissemination of word and sacraments; both missions are essential to the faith and life of the servant church.

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ the Servant provide the impetus, shape, and content for diaconal life and ministry. Jesus the foot-washer comes to serve, to risk, to assume awkward and uncomfortable positions, to identify with the poor and oppressed, to wait on those in need of any kind, to speak out and to work for change in the structures of society. Christ the Servant, by his own example and exhortation, calls his followers to their own diaconal ministry. Because what is everyone's responsibility often becomes no one's responsibility, diaconal ministers/deacons would be asked to model, live out, call, and empower others to their baptismal ministry of word and service. We are admonished to let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. The mind of Christ is joyful service in obedience to the will of God made possible by our justification by faith.

The relationship and interdependence of the baptized people of God and those whom the community of faith sets apart for ordained leadership is critical. We cannot set one against the other, but must affirm and uphold each other as we all share the call to ministry. Likewise, the relationship and interdependence of the different expressions of ordered ministry is extremely important if we are going to live out our mission and ministry to the fullest. Bishops, pastors, and diaconal ministers, along with all the baptized, each have vital and important roles and functions if the church is fully going to be the church.

Diaconal ministry has a significant history in the church. We are invited to rediscover its original richness and inherent importance. Diaconal ministry is

essential to both the internal life and the external testimony of the church. The forms of diaconal service in the early church were diverse, but there is substantial evidence that diaconal service typically was inclusive of both the outreaching service to human need and the liturgical and catechetical service to the Christian community. The involvement of the deacon in the liturgy links the work of the people in worship with the work of the people in the world, reminding us that the joyful message of Christ offered in word and sacrament also means that the hungry, the poor, the sick, and the oppressed will receive help, nourishment, and new hope.

The roots of modern diaconal service go back to mid-nineteenth-century Europe when the church was challenged to combat the enormous social problems of the time. Out of this was born the deaconess movement. The history of the diaconate offers important insights which challenge us to develop a continuity to that past while at the same time daring originality for today.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (World Council of Churches, 1982) has stimulated ecumenical discussion of the diaconate. A differentiated role within the office of ministry, deacons are seen to be called and ordained along with bishops and pastors to build up the

community and to strengthen its witness. Affirming that ministry belongs to the whole people of God, the church calls and ordains some from their midst whose chief responsibility is to proclaim and teach, to celebrate the sacraments and to guide the life of the community in its worship, its mission, and its caring ministry.

It is the mission potential that I hope and believe can drive the development of a diaconate. In an increasingly pluralist, multicultural context our society begs to be reformed and transformed by the gospel which reconciles and builds unity, *koinonia*, and spiritual maturity. Diaconal work can help develop new models for congregational, synodical, institutional, and ecumenical ministry which will bring our church activity closer to real life. In these critical times when human need—physical and spiritual suffering among both rich and poor—cries out for the gospel of God's saving grace, the church's ministry would be enhanced by intentional diaconal ministry. The basic underlying theme which focuses all of diaconal ministry is the word of God, proclaimed in service whether the diaconal minister serves as educator, musician, parish administrator, evangelist, youth minister, or social ministry director. The activities and purposes should be flexible and responsive to the needs of a particular time and place, not tied down and restricted by what we have always done. The existing ministries carried out by associates in ministry (certified lay ministers) would be theologically strengthened by a diaconal identity. Innovative ministries may yet be developed with new vision for service and witness limited only by our ability to respond to God's gospel and to human need.

Diaconal ministry must be rooted in prayer, nurtured by word and sacraments, and motivated by care, compassion, and hospitality. The diaconate does not compete with either pastoral ministry or the ministry of the baptized. Ordaining some does not dismiss or deny the gifts of others, but rather enhances and equips the whole people. The church needs to prepare, examine, call, and ordain those ministries which are arranged and regulated by the church for the sake of the gospel. An ordained diaconate offers an opportunity for renewal and fuller realization of the church's mission in the world.