
Stewards of God's Love for the World: The Relationship of Deacon and Stewardship

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If someone told me ten years ago when I was a junior in college that I was going to be a deacon and passionate about stewardship, I would have been surprised to say the least. I probably would have asked, "What's a deacon?" And then, "Why stewardship?" Fast forward ten years and, now that both are true, I believe that there is a deep relationship between the role of deacon and stewardship.

Being a deacon broadens the senses to God at work in the larger world. A deacon, as a minister of Word and Service, makes the connection between the faith community and the larger world more intentional. This connection helps listen, learn, share, and tell stories of God's work and promises. It also helps tell the stories of the world's needs, inviting the people of God to participate and respond, and to thank them for doing so. In other words, a deacon helps the faith community live and grow in its identity as stewards of God's love.

In exploring this connection, this article describes what a deacon is and what it means to be a minister of Word and Service. From there, some assumptions and convictions about stewardship are named, especially the belief that at the heart of stewardship is the gift and promise of God's love, together with our call, duty, and joy to respond to it. Some basic practices regarding the work of stewardship will be explored.¹ After each section we will reflect on what this means for a deacon.² This includes thinking about what a deacon might bring, what opportunities might be created, and how the presence of a deacon might foster a more holistic sense of stewardship.

What is a deacon anyway?

Throughout the history of the church, there have been people serving at the intersections of the church and the world. Within many contexts, this intersection has roots in the *diakonia* concept. Jesus refers to this concept in describing his own identity and ministry in the Gospel of Luke. As Norma Cook Everist notes: "Jesus

1. Based in part on the work of Charles R. Lane in *Ask, Thank, Tell: Improving Stewardship Ministry in Your Congregation*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

2. This is partly inspired by Martin Luther's approach to writing and teaching in the Small Catechism, as he famously and repeatedly asked the question: "What is this?" Or, "What does this mean?"

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uses the word *diakoneo* about himself: "I am among you as one who serves," as found in Luke 22:27.³ From this term of *diakonia* or *diakoneo* comes our conception of serving or service. More directly from this term comes the title, "Deacon." Functionally, within the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, deacon is the title for a rostered minister of Word and Service. Deacons serve alongside pastors, or rostered ministers of Word and Sacrament, as leaders of the church and God's work in the world.

What a deacon does varies. In some contexts and faith traditions, deacons have important liturgical roles in worship, like reading the lessons or preparing the prayer petitions. Deacons may serve in chaplaincy roles, or give leadership in nonprofits. They may have specialized ministry calls around: administration; children, youth and family ministry; faith formation; stewardship; or worship and music. Simply, they have gifts for ministry that have been affirmed by the larger church and have been called into formal ministry in response to the gospel.

Norma Cook Everist articulates the breadth of the term deacon as she writes: "Deacons respond to the unhealed hurts of the world. *Diakonia* is not an add-on, but essential to the life and work of the church. Service is offered not just so people will be ready to hear the gospel. Nor is *diakonia* merely the carrier of the

3. Norma Cook Everist, "Minister of Word and Service: Deacon," in "Deeper understandings – November 2017," *Living Lutheran*, (30 October 2017). <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/10/minister-of-word-and-service-deacon/>

gospel. In service is the real presence of Christ and salvation.⁴ It may not be too much to claim that a deacon, through Word and Service, makes the mystery and promises of Christ's love known in tangible ways in everyday life. It is in the day-to-day of life, that stewardship is made real.⁵

This does not mean that Word and Service ministry as stewardship is limited to those who are called deacons. Stewardship is something that every child of God is called to in their baptisms. In the Lutheran liturgy, this is most clearly seen through the promises of affirmation of baptism, or "baptismal promises."⁶ A formalized minister of Word and Service can help individuals better understand this, however, and make these promises and connections tangible by connecting faith with daily life. When this happens, a deacon becomes a model for living out a life of service that all are called to in their baptisms.

Heart of stewardship: God's love and our joyful response

At the heart of stewardship is an understanding that all that we have and all that we are belong to God. This belief is grounded in Psalm 24, which begins, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (24:1). In this sense, stewardship is holistic and much wider, broader, and deeper than the average person or congregation member might realize. According to the psalmist, this basically means that everything is God's, and that encompasses us, too.

All we have has been entrusted to our care by God to use, manage, and steward. In the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, God entrusts us with responsibilities and calls us to be co-creators with God.⁷ As the psalmist says, God has given humanity dominion over the works of God's hands, and "God has put all things under their feet" (8:6). This act of entrusting comes with responsibility and the understanding that dominion does not mean domination and destruction, but care and stewardship. This responsibility is not one of obligation, however, nor is it that if we do not care for these things, God's work will not be done. Mark Allan Powell reasons: "God could accomplish whatever God wants without our assistance, but God has chosen to use us as agents for God's mission, and that means (among other things) that our lives can really

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count for something."⁸ Thus, we are entrusted with responsibility. Stewardship in its broad sense is part of our identity as a child of God who has been called, created, and is loved by God.⁹

As a child of God, we are entrusted with much to steward. The list of what we are to steward includes the body and health-related matters: our lives, health, bodies, souls, minds, and hearts. It includes the creative powers that God has entrusted to us: our stories, ideas, dreams, and questions. It includes our whole self in daily life, including our time, talents, gifts, strengths, passions, vocations, and relationships. It includes financial responsibility and means partaking in the economy and society through our treasures, money, finances, and assets of all kinds. It also includes creation and all that belongs to it.

God does all this entrusting out of a deep love for us. The ultimate gifts that we profess in faith are the promises of new life, resurrection, and salvation that we know most clearly through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. All of this is God's work. It is work we could never do, nor ever earn. In that sense, this work is a gift, and these gifts and promises are freeing. They point to a juxtaposition for which Martin Luther is famous in *The Freedom of a Christian*. Luther argues that because of God in Christ, Christians are perfectly free and bound to none. Yet at the same time, they are bound to their neighbor.¹⁰ The juxtaposition flows out of Luther's articulation of the "joyous exchange," or "Christ's righteousness in place of human sin."¹¹ God's gifts and promises have an effect on us. We are so moved by all that God has done, continues to do, and promises to do for us, that we cannot help but be overjoyed and willingly share in God's good work. What we do is our joyful response, and the response to God's promises and gifts is our stewardship.

What might this mean as a deacon?

This theological reflection explores the depth of stewardship: our

4. Ibid.

5. More thought regarding diaconal ministry, diakonia, and Word and Service ministry can be found in "The Future of Diaconal Ministry," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Vol. 42 No. 3, (July 2015). <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/view/issue/6/2>

6. These include: "to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236.

7. Especially Gen 1:27–28, where God says, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"; and Gen 2:19–20, where God invites Adam to name the creatures.

8. Mark Allan Powell, "Stewardship for the Missional Church," in *Word & World*, Supplement Series 6, "Rethinking Stewardship: Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices," (St. Paul, Minn.: Luther Seminary, 2010), 82.

9. Built on a baptismal theology, as well as the reminder that we are created in God's own image and entrusted with responsibility as in Gen 1:27–28.

10. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," (1520), in *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform*, Timothy J. Wengert, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1:522.

11. Ibid., 1:471.

relationship with God and our stewarding of that which God has entrusted to us. A deacon, as a minister of Word and Service, can articulate this as any pastor or person might through expressions of the "Word" as in preaching, prayer, proclamation, and teaching. However, a deacon has a unique calling and capacity around "Service," which directs them to make connections between the theological and practical realities of daily life.

Deacons are called and serving outward in the world: "out" in the field or on the ground with eyes to see, hands to help, and hearts to serve their neighbor. Whether out in the world or more directly through the congregation, deacons are a physical manifestation of the service piece that is stewardship. They tell the story about the meaning of service to those who may not regularly witness the service of ministry, although they are offering support financially or by other means. Deacons share the story about how and why they are serving.

Tenants of stewardship exercise: ask, thank, and tell

Flowing out of our joyful response to God's work, gifts, and promises, comes our work as the people of God. It is work that is a response to God's gifts for us. It is also the life of a steward. In the congregational setting, this work might be framed well by thinking about, and exercising, stewardship in three parts: ask, thank, and tell.¹² Though these three parts are presented in this order, this does not necessarily mean that one part comes before another.

Ask or invite

In the church, we ask and invite people to be a part of ministry and God's work in the world. This asking and invitation is a part of stewardship—the part where community and relationships are built and where people participate in God's mission as new passions and vocations are discovered.

The asking and invitation can also involve financial giving. However, in the memorable history of the church, this is where some of the most problematic aspects of stewardship have occurred. In many settings, the holistic nature of stewardship has been lost, because the church as an institution has unintentionally made stewardship only about money and finances. To broaden the definition and understanding of what stewardship is means reclaiming the concept of stewardship. It is also a culture shift to a more helpful and hopeful paradigm. Recognizing the complexity of financial stewardship can point to the tension theologically between scarcity and abundance. When congregations and faith communities equate stewardship only with finances and budgets, a culture of scarcity is created and enforced.

Consider these fill-in-the-blank sentences: "We need more money, so we can do ____." Or, "We don't have enough money, so we can't do ____." Whether or not that is the actual message that has been given, this is likely how it might sound to the average person in a congregation or community.

12. Lane, *Ask, Thank, Tell*.

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gifts for us.

Alternatively, by living into a more holistic sense of stewardship, there is likely more sense of invitation involved. It might start with a story of ministry in action, then also with an invitation to come and be a part of it. For example, a rural congregation supports an after-school program in its community that serves nearly 80 youth. To make something like that happen in a rural community takes buy-in and tangible support—the giving of finances, time, service, and food.

Instead of making one large ask for financial support, congregations already have a sense of their assets both in the faith community and their larger community, how to connect people with ways to help that match their own individual passions, expertise, and abilities. Making an invitation takes time and may involve some form of spiritual gifts inventory or assessment. However, such invitations can be more effective and life-giving in the long term. As a faith community, extending an invitation to be a part of the ministry of God's church might start simply with an invitation to "come and see that the Lord is good," just like we hear when we come to the table for communion.

What might this mean as a deacon?

Deacons serve out of a lens of service with focus on the neighbor. Asking or inviting others to participate, join, and serve together as stewards can follow naturally. By being on the ground and at the intersection points of church and world, deacons have a unique awareness to the needs, gifts, and strengths of both individuals and the larger community. As the church grows in awareness of the needs in the world and works to respond, a deacon helps make the connection.

Saying "Thank you"

While it seems simple, the most critical thing in stewardship is to say, "Thank you!" This can be as simple as a thank-you note by mail or email, or a personal phone call. When one is acknowledged for their service and participation, they are more likely to continue to be involved. Saying thank you models the gratitude that is naturally part of a stewardship theology of joyful response. If God has done all the hard work for us, all we can do as God's children is to give thanks and praise in response, and then go to serve God and neighbor.¹³ As you give thanks to God every day in

13. Within the "Great Thanksgiving" in the common liturgy, the

your prayers, you also thank people every step of the way.

What might this mean as a deacon?

Being on the ground provides eyes to see things that might not always otherwise be noticed in the church. There is an opportunity to recognize gifts that pastors and other congregational leaders may not know about. Through no fault of their own, these leaders may overlook some people who are serving or doing ministry in ways that are behind the scenes. A deacon can notice these people and thank them, even providing awareness to others about sharing words of thanks and gratitude by highlighting their stories of ministry and action. A deacon can connect their work either in daily life or in the congregation with the larger body of the faithful.

Telling and sharing the story

Alongside inviting and thanking, telling is an equally important practice. Together with asking someone to be a part of something or thanking them for being a part of something, there is also a story to tell. For God's people this starts with telling, living, showing, and being a part of God's story of love, an active and ongoing story of life in the world.

As faith communities, it is vital to tell the story of ministry in action. This can happen through stories in newsletters or social media posts. This can be stories of how a congregation has been a part of social ministry through a short story in worship at the offering time. For example, one pastor is well-known for saying, "You traveled around the world with your tithes and offerings this week!" This makes the connection between the gathered congregation and the larger world.¹⁴ Stories can be shared in depth from the pulpit, or over coffee and conversation outside of worship. The important thing is that these are stories of God's people doing God's work, and thereby stories of God doing God's work in the world, told and shared. If these stories are not told, how will people in congregations and the larger community know about what God is up to in the world through them?

What might this mean as a deacon?

In telling and sharing the story, one is proclaiming the Word of God. On the one hand, this can take place as preaching, and deacons as ministers of Word are called to this. This could also look like leading conversations and discussions, writing to raise awareness or sharing verbally to make the connection between God's love and ministry in action. As a deacon may follow God's call to serve at the margins and intersection points between church and world, they may see and learn stories, having conversations that

presiding minister may say or chant that, "it is indeed right, our duty, and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise..." This makes the connection between God's work, worship, and our stewardship. See, for example, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 108.

14. Charles R. Lane and Grace Duddy Pomroy, *Embracing Stewardship: How to Put Stewardship at the Heart of Your Congregation's Life* (Embracing Stewardship, LLC, 2016), 83.

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might not always be heard or known in the average congregation. When appropriate, these stories can be tied together and told as a way of sharing God's love in the world: how we each live and abide in that love through our financial offerings and our vocations in daily life. God's promises that we know most clearly through the Gospel need to be told and shared by us. Deacons can do this not only from the pulpit but also through word and deed in service, meeting people where they are at, accompanying them, and embodying the call to love and serve the neighbor.

Putting it altogether in stewardship as a deacon

These notions of stewardship highlight some possibilities for diakonia, and specifically stewardship by deacons. A deacon by the very nature of call and ministry office has a sense of serving and service. There is a deep sense of awareness with eyes to see. A deacon, living at points of intersection between the church and world, is someone who is "in the field" and "on the ground." This is invaluable for highlighting the needs of both God's people and creation, helping tell the story, asking and inviting others to participate and respond. By being in the field, a deacon can directly help steward and respond to God's call at the margins, making connections between needs, gifts, strengths, resources, opportunities, and assets.

Looking back at my life journey, that college junior should have known that God was up to something. Somehow, I knew this in my head, as I discerned and decided to double-major in economics and religion. According to the faculty at my university, that was not a very common double-major.¹⁵ However, it made perfect sense to me as a way of understanding the world. In retrospect, it makes perfect sense for why I have fallen in love with stewardship.

This does not, however, answer the question of why I am a deacon. I am a deacon, at least in part, because I believe I have felt nudgings and callings from God in the Holy Spirit over time in different forms. There was never one entirely clear sense of call.

15. I attended Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, graduating in 2009.

There was certainly never any angel bells or great moments of “ah-ha” clarity. Yet helping other people is something that I have a deep passion for, as well as helping others grow in their passion for what they do.

Another honest answer to the question of why I am a deacon rests with those brave members of my family who have been willing to push me and wonder with me over the years. I recall my grandpa, a retired pastor, once telling me: “You know, Timothy, you don’t have to be a pastor to serve God and do ministry.” For some that might have sounded terrible, but for me it was freeing. I recall the ups and downs in ministry that my mom experienced as a director of music and Word and Service minister herself, who was undervalued by some of those serving in Word and Sacrament ministry. These experiences give me a sense of assurance together with a realistic optimism.

We need deacons in the church, just as we need pastors and lay people. We all do God’s work together. We are all stewards of God’s love together. When we do it together with our related but unique capacities and unique gifts, God’s work is done more fully and faithfully. When serving together as God’s people, what God entrusts to us is stewarded more holistically. When serving together, there is a better opportunity to discern what God’s kingdom looks like, how we are all part of its upbuilding and in-breaking, each of us in our own unique ways. When we do this together as deacons, pastors, and all the faithful, we steward all that we have received and all that we are. In so doing, we bear God’s love for the world.

For Discussion:

1. Do you know, or have you met a deacon? What gifts did you see them bring?
2. What is the relationship between stewardship and service?
3. Reflect on a time when you helped someone out, with/through your gifts and/or resources. In what ways do you think you stewarded God’s love?

When serving together, there is a better opportunity to discern what God’s kingdom looks like, how we are all part of its upbuilding and in-breaking, each of us in our own unique ways.
