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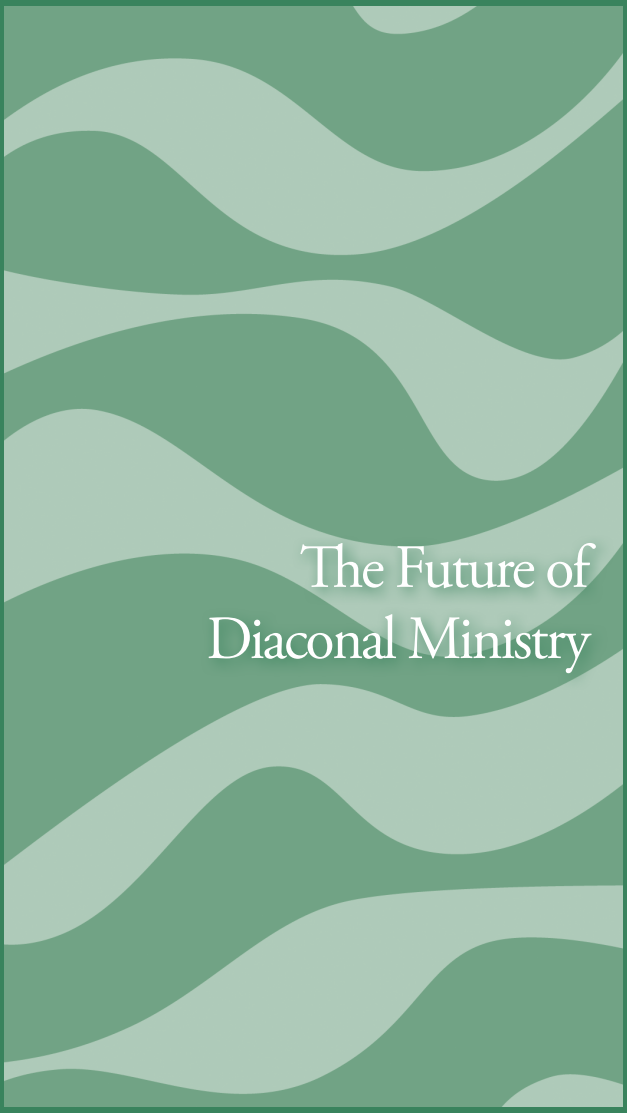

CURRENTS
in Theology and Mission

Currents
in Theology and Mission

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Dear *Currents* Subscriber:

For several months the editorial team of *Currents in Theology and Mission* has been discussing an exciting new possibility related to the future of *Currents*. We have come to the decision that the time is right for *Currents* to become a fully online, open access journal. While this means that beginning in 2016 *Currents* no longer will appear as a printed journal, it also offers many advantages. The journal will become free of charge for our loyal subscribers, while at the same time opening up the contents of our established publication to a whole new world of readers across the globe. Moreover, this new mode of delivery makes the production of *Currents* financially sustainable in an unprecedented way.

We especially thank you, our loyal readers over the years, for subscribing to *Currents* and ask your continued support and readership as we move to our new format in 2016. We pledge to you our continued commitment to deliver a quality theological journal in support of the ministry and mission of the church as it responds to the ever-changing signs of the times.

We will continue to publish *Currents* in its print format through 2015, in order to give our readers ample time to be informed about how to access the journal in the future and to honor subscriptions already purchased. We gladly will accept one-year subscriptions for 2015, but urge our readers not to extend their subscriptions beyond 2015. If there is any money to be refunded, we certainly will do this upon request, even while allowing readers the opportunity to contribute any remaining amount to support the future of *Currents*.

Beginning with the January 2015 issue, the journal will be published quarterly, in January, April, July, and October.

In future issues we will provide readers ample information about how to easily access *Currents* in its new online format. In the meantime, we look forward to your continued readership and support as we move into the future together.

Kathleen D. Billman; S.D. Giere; Craig L. Nessan; *Currents* editors

The Future of Diaconal Ministry

The reinvigoration of the ministry of all the baptized is inextricably linked to the capacity of the church to reimagine the future of diaconal ministry. As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, no theme from the sixteenth century has more potency to contribute to the renewal of the church in the next generation than the universal priesthood of all believers. Whereas we have arrived at an ecclesial status quo that has "churchified" Christian existence, equating what happens through the church institution as Christianity per se, Luther described faith as "a living, daring confidence in God's grace so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times." ("Prefaces to the New Testament," in Luther's Works 35:370–371.)

This vibrant and dynamic understanding of faith means that the life of the baptized is not something confined to what happens in a church building, no matter how important worship, preaching, teaching, and sacraments remain for the formation of Christian identity and mission. Rather, the stations where Christians are sent to live out their faith with living, daring confidence are in the arenas of daily life where God gives us neighbors to serve in families, schools, workplaces, local communities, and civic engagement for the common good.

We stand at a juncture where the decline in church affiliation in the United States has been steadily gaining momentum. While people, especially young people, genuinely search for meaning and ways of authentic service to others, they do not perceive what the church has to offer as a living, daring confidence on which to stake their lives. Enter diaconal ministry. The heart of diaconal ministry is at the dynamic exchange between church and world. Diakonia means service. Diaconal ministers are called to bring the crying needs of the world to the attention of the church and to equip the church for addressing holistically the aching needs of society. Diaconal ministry, a ministry of Word and service, in this respect has two key features: 1) the *exemplary function* to model the character of the ministry of all baptized people at the interface of church and world, and 2) an intrinsically *catalytic function* to equip intentionally all members of the body of Christ for claiming their baptismal vocation of service to neighbors in the arenas of their daily lives.

The articles in this issue provide a rich array of perspectives that focus on the future of diaconal ministry as crucial to the ongoing Reformation and renewal of a servant church. **Norma Cook Everist** defines diaconal ministry as a theology of the cross and resurrection, in which Word and service ministry

focuses on those in need, particularly the marginalized. Diakonia is faithful, authoritative, relational, powerful, and public. Diaconal ministers are called to live together in a diverse, historic, global diaconal community. **E. Louise Williams** reflects on the recent work of The Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches related to the church's diaconal mission. The diaconate as a public ministry of the church can lead and serve the mission of all God's people. This article locates the experience of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, including the current discussion of a deacon roster, within the global and ecumenical context.

Diane Marten provides a description of the evolution of the Lutheran Deaconess Association's diaconate from institutional education to creative formation for servant leadership inside and outside a changing church. Because God calls the whole church into servanthood and because we need a variety of gifts for service, the diaconate expands the church's vision. **Shera W. Nesheim** describes how diaconal ministry *bridges* between the church and world, enabling the baptized to embody Christ's presence and healing within and beyond the congregational community. The unique ministry of Heart River Lutheran Church, in Mandan, North Dakota, whose mission is presence and bridge-crossing with youth who have been incarcerated, is a powerful example of God's people grounding themselves in baptism, seeking to serve the "least of these."

Becky Dodson Louter and **Myka Kennedy Stephens** present the vision of the United Methodist deaconess and home missioner community for the future of lay diaconal ministries as informed by Scripture, North American Methodist history and heritage, Wesleyan theology and doctrine, and the authors' first-hand experiences and engagement in diakonia. **Darryl W. Stephens** elaborates how a deacon's eye for compassion and justice can assist congregations wounded and violated by sexual abuse committed by individuals in ministerial leadership. This article describes how the identity and ministry of the deacon can identify, name, and address these wounds. **Beate Hofmann** gives an overview of the development of diaconic work in Germany in free associations outside of the church and as important pillars of the social welfare system in German society under free market conditions. Theological perspective remains necessary in the multi-rational management of diaconal organizations to advocate for ethical, spiritual, and theological issues.

Susanne Watson Epting, writing from an Episcopal Church perspective, argues that deacons serve as living reminders of Christ's own servant ministry, in order that the church might be equipped as a diaconal, servant church. The ordination vows of and charges to deacons reflect the promises we all make in our baptismal covenant, thus calling us not only to a priesthood of all believers, but to the diakonia of all believers. **Craig L. Nessan** interprets the service of Jesus Christ as inherently diaconal ministry. Word and sacrament ministry needs to be renewed among us finally as a ministry oriented toward God's purposes of

equipping a diaconal church in service for the life of the world. This concluding article provides a bibliography of resources for further study.

Each of the main articles in the July issue includes questions for reflection and discussion, in order that this issue might be useful for personal or group study about the future of diaconal ministry. We encourage a wide-ranging discussion in the church about the issues related to the future of diaconal ministry, especially occasioned by the ELCA's anticipated actions in 2016 regarding a unified deacon roster. The future of diaconal ministry for the revitalization of the church's mission, particularly the reclaiming of the universal neighborliness of all believers, is now.

We dedicate this issue to Ann Rezny, our steadfast, skilled, and faithful Assistant Editor, whose recently diagnosed illness led to the shockingly rapid decline of her health and her death in May. The editorial team of *Currents in Theology and Mission* has been indebted to Ann for her constancy in the production of the journal and her commitment to its mission for many years. We acknowledge her many contributions to our common work, including her vision for the future of the journal as an online, open access publication. Ann's presence and gifts will be greatly missed. All readers of *Currents* have benefitted from her behind-the-scenes servant ministry issue after issue. We thank God for Ann's life. We pray God's comfort and hope in Christ Jesus for all her loved ones.

Craig L. Nessan, *Issue Editor*

Sermon by Pastor Joan L. Beck

Memorial Service for Ann Rezny

Augustana Chapel at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
June 9, 2015

As we consider the lilies of the field, as we remember Ann, by your Spirit strengthen us not to worry but to trust that nothing can separate us from your help and love in Christ Jesus. Amen.

"Look at the birds of the air," Jesus reminds us. The red cardinal that, when he lands high in a tree to chirp his insistent song, makes it a Christmas tree. The green parrots that early in the morning find the highest perches in nearby Florence Stout Park because there the sun hits first when it rises over the buildings. The black crows, observant, talkative, clannish. The baby ducks at Botany Pond on the University of Chicago campus, now two-thirds the size of their mother but still fuzzballs.

These birds spell out for Jesus the care of the Creator. They eat without gardening or going to the store. They find that God has provided plants and grains and bugs and worms and little fish for them. God feeds them. So why are we anxious?

"Consider the lilies of the field." The bearded iris astonish me every year. They rise from the ground, first spiky green leaves in flattened rows, then round stems with several bumps in a spiral that will, one at a time, from the bottom up, unfurl silky, soft, translucent petals in vibrant colors: Three lower petals rounding down and three upper petals curving up, and on each lower petal a strip of furry hairs like a caterpillar climbing out from the center. And the smell, if you bury your nose close enough to the flower, is like citrus of one kind or another, perhaps with a hint of licorice or vanilla.

Each flower a work of art. Yet hung in no gallery, adorning no prince or celebrity on the red carpet, just arising, blossoming, and passing away. Isn't the world awash in beauty and grace? Doesn't God have abundance to spare, sufficient to clothe and care for each of us?

When I slowed down to consider once again the artistry of the birds and the flowers, I thought of Ann, because she was an artist among us, and when I thought of Ann I remembered Dorothy Sayers, the mid-twentieth-century essayist, theologian, and murder mystery writer in Oxford, England. Dorothy Sayers understood artists as having a special affinity to God. She wrote, "'God created the world by imagination' [quoting Berdyaev]. This experience of the creative imagination in the common man or woman and in the artist is the only thing we have to go upon in entertaining and formulating the concept of creation. Outside our own experience of procreation and creation we can form no notion of how anything comes into being.…

"It is to the creative artists that we should naturally turn for an exposition of what is meant by those creedal formulae which deal with the nature of the Creative [Creator's] mind."[1]

1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987; originally printed 1941, renewed 1968 by Anthony Fleming), 29–30.

What, then, might we remember about God when we consider Ann, the graphic artist of LSTC?

We might notice the abundance of Ann's designs. From signs to cards, from typeface selections to magazine layouts, from publications that have their season to lasting logos, her "fingerprints are everywhere" [quote from kids' camp song]. We do not even always know that Ann was the designer. Just so the natural world that God created, with phenomena as large as galaxies and as small as subatomic particles, surrounds and sustains us, though we don't always connect it with God.

We notice that Ann's designs show individuality with distinction. The Sola Café logo does not look like the 50th anniversary logo or an issue of the Epistle. Just so has God created each of us unique, irreplaceable, precious, and beautiful.

Ann showed us the power of service and self-giving. "She had a strong sense of service," Jan Boden said. After all, she kept working for churches and church-related organizations, instead of in more lucrative fields.

"Her work was her *vocation*," Jan stressed. "She gave her gifts to a larger purpose…. And she gave [her gifts] freely—perhaps too freely," Jan added, with irony. In March Ann told me, "I've worked for Lutherans for 20 years now. I love Lutherans. They're aligned with my form of liberalism and my view of Christianity." Just so God tirelessly keeps supporting the larger vision that God values: a diverse world of justice, reconciliation, and peace; what Jesus in the reading today calls seeking first the reign of God and God's righteousness.

Ann modeled collaboration and accommodation in her work. Jan Boden wondered aloud if Ann was ever wholly satisfied with anything she designed for LSTC because the originals were so changed as a result of collaboration with the interested parties. Just so God has had to bend and bow to stay in communion with this creation, especially with people, in our brokenness.

Perhaps that is why, in the LSTC logo, the T is so prominent. It has the shape of a Cross. This logo was not Ann's design, but on the other hand, she never changed it. It tells us that God's identification with us came to a fullness in Jesus' death, a death like ours, on our account and on our behalf. It is under the sign of this Cross, marked on our brows and in our school's logo that we gather and go forth to serve God's world.

And so there is also gratitude. Ann told me, "I used to be a whiner. [I had complaints about everything. But now that I am on this short trail to the end,] if there was one thing I could teach the world [it would be this]: Stop whining. Look at things positively. Life is too short."

Dorothy Sayers said, "To write the poem (or, of course, to give it material form in speech or song), is an act of love towards the [artist's] own imaginative act and towards his [her] fellow beings. It is a social act."[2]

We are grateful for Ann's society with us, for her love. In her life she struggled with things that happened to her (as they may to any person)—physical challenges, relational upsets, financial stresses. We honor Ann for showing the Creator's gifts of abundance, individuality, service, collaboration, the self-giving of the cross, gratitude, and the "more" that each of us knows from our own experience of her.

I heard that besides "Downton Abbey," Ann loved to watch "Dancing with the Stars." In her art, and in her life with family and friends and the communities

2. Ibid., 42.

she served, she was dancing with the Creator of the Stars of Night, the Provider for the birds of the air, the Visual Designer of the lilies of the field, the Lord of the Dance. It is clear that nothing—not disability nor heartache nor loss, nor finally cancer and death—nothing ever did or ever could separate Ann from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus.

Might we (also, therefore, likewise) learn from Ann to whine less, and dance more?

Note: This tribute to Ann Rezny, former Currents *staff member and graphic designer, was given on the occasion of the memorial service at LSTC held in Ann's memory. The service was led by the Rev. Joan L. Beck, then Cornelsen Director of Spiritual Formation and Pastor to the community, LSTC. Pastor Beck concluded her service at LSTC at the end of June and has taken a call to Trinity Lutheran Church in Lynnwood, Washington.*

Ann Emery Rezny was born August 3, 1954. She grew up in Highland, Indiana. She studied fine art at Indiana University and Purdue University and graduated from Michigan State University with a degree in fine art and graphic design.

Ann became LSTC's part-time graphic designer and production manager in 2006; in addition, Ann worked on *Currents in Theology and Mission,* the Augustana Heritage Association newsletter, and freelance work for the ELCA and other church-related organizations. During the last year, Ann also worked part-time for The Village Presbyterian Church in Northbrook, Illinois.

For many years, Ann served as the designer and production manager of *Lutheran Partners* magazine. She spent 16 years as a Creative Services Specialist for Augsburg Fortress Publishers, working on many projects for the units of the ELCA. She taught advertising art and computer design as an adjunct faculty member at Triton College. And previous to that, she had a career in advertising as a designer, typographer, production coordinator, and illustrator.

Ann died Saturday, May 16, 2015, at her home. She is survived by her two children, William (Will) and Mary McShane, and a brother, Robert Rezny.

Diaconal Ministry from the Open Tomb to the Open World

Norma Cook Everist
Professor of Church and Ministry
Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa

Faithful diakonia

Jesus was a diaconal minister. We are called to be faithful to Jesus Christ. He "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Faithful diakonia is theologically grounded in a theology of the cross; otherwise we would deny the deep needs of people and the great wounds of the world. Diakonia needs a cross *and* resurrection theology. The women who came with Jesus from Galilee saw Jesus' body laid in the tomb, served by preparing spices and ointments, were the first to hear the word of the resurrection, and told "the eleven and all the rest" (Luke 23:55–24:9). "The church has both its historical and its theological basis in the resurrection of Jesus Christ…'death no longer has dominion over him' (Rom 6:9)…The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the lens through which the church perceives Jesus' own mission and ministry, and retells the story…In a slave's death on the cross Christ endured the consequence of his own diaconal ministry."[1] Jesus also uses the word about himself, *diakoneo*: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

"The church is called to identify, warn against, and oppose the powers of death and sin, without counting the cost."[2] Faithfulness does not imply naiveté. With eyes wide open we acknowledge the cost. Faithfulness compels us clearly to see the truth, to not pass by, to not let the cost stop us. To be faithful is to be responsive to the pain and the problems of the world with a prophetic voice, and to love with boldness. This may mean carefully guiding a fearful faith community going through trauma, walking with a young adult sorting out competing choices in a complex culture, or remaining in a dangerous place of service even when others think it unwise.

Wherever we serve, we are not alone. Diaconal ministry is definitely ministry in the world, but it is never ministry outside the body of Christ, because the Risen Christ has an embodied reality on earth in the Christian community.[3]

Diakonia is not just an add-on to

1. The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity* (London: Anglican Consultative Council and The Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 9 (III A.8 and 9). I was privileged to be a consultant to that Commission in Kent, England, and Hanover, Germany.
2. Ibid., 11 (II B.15).
3. Richard Carlson, "Diaconal Ministry from a Pauline Perspective," in Duane H. Larson, ed., *From Word and Sacrament* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999), 28–37. Cf. also Rom 12, 1 Cor 12, and Eph 4.

the work of the church. It is core to the faith, crucial to the church. Service is offered not just so people will be ready to *hear* the gospel. Nor is diakonia merely the *carrier* of the gospel. Christ is alive where the people of God serve in Jesus' name. In this service is the Christ, the "real presence" of Christ and salvation.[4]

We need to be in the world, to be faithful leaders, but not so far out front or detached that we are separated from those whom we are called to lead. Our vocation as diaconal ministers, rooted in baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is to live as faithful servant leaders, contributing to peace with justice, compassion for the suffering, and preservation and care of creation.

Imagine the future! Picture Jesus Christ alive through your serving, tending, healing, reconciling, and building bridges of justice. Where will that take you? Where will that take a diaconal church? Let that image carry you into the future.

Authoritative diakonia

The history of diakonia goes back to the New Testament. Through the centuries, deacons and deaconesses served on behalf of the church. Their place and authority waxed and waned; most often they served among the marginalized.[5]

The first century to the fourth have been called the Golden Age of the diaconate, when deacons, prior to the legalization of Christianity, are revealed in significant servant, liturgical, and administrative roles. They were the eyes and ears of the early church, the holy criers, reporting needs to the bishop. The Eucharist was a bridge between liturgy and charity, which extended beyond the Christian community to those who were not in the church.[6] Ignatius wrote that deacons were to be respected because they represented Jesus Christ. Ministerial order was not conceived by Ignatius or others in terms of status or rank but rather of function.[7]

> Diakonia is not just an add-on to the work of the church. It is core to the faith, crucial to the church.

Beginning in the fourth century, however, things changed when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Hierarchical structures diminished the diaconate and reduced their roles. Presbyters took over direct responsibility for sacramental ministry and male monastic orders took on charitable work. Women lost options for service; however religious orders of nuns did provide some responsibility for their own worship and administration.[8] Yet still they were supervised by a patriarchal hierarchy.

Through the centuries, however, "Diaconal ministers are called to be agents of the church in interpreting and meeting needs, hopes and concerns within church

4. Norma Cook Everist, "Theological Reflection" presentation at World Diakonia 19th Assembly, July 2005, Durham, England, 2.

5. See Jeannine E. Olson, *Deacons and Deaconesses Through the Centuries, revised edition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005).

6. Ibid., 28–37.

7. James M. Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 43, 50, 52.

8. Susan Wilds McArver, "A History of the Diaconate" in *From Word and Sacrament,* 68–70.

and society."[9] Church authority for diakonia is not a staid and static thing. In every age diaconal ministers need to claim their authority in the church and to help the church claim its authority to speak and act in the world. "The church is called to trust God's promise…to receive the gifts of the Spirit, to recognize and seize the opportunities…and to accept with thanksgiving the ministries which serve the reign of God."[10] Trust! Seize!

Some churches have been reluctant to claim diakonia as their calling. There is something at stake in forgetting and disregarding those who are poor, and marginalizing those who serve on behalf of marginalized people. In so many places where I have traveled to be with diaconal ministers at home and abroad, I hear, "Our church does not recognize us," or "Our church no longer supports us." How sad! Not only for these servants, but for the church and the world.

But I have hope for the future. In being with diaconal ministers in Australia, Canada, Jamaica, and Tanzania, as well as in Europe, I see a diaconal movement today which is unstoppable. These servants are authorized and authenticated in Christ.

Authority includes accountability and is not just one-directional. If diaconal ministers are to be agents of the church, "such a relation of agency implies a relation of accountability…for providing adequate support and preparation for diaconal ministries carried out in its name."[11]

In the past few decades we have seen a huge breakthrough: authorized ministries of pastor (including bishop) and diaconal minister are based not on gender but on gifts, all open to both women and men. Wartburg Theological Seminary offers an MA in Diaconal Ministry degree, both residential and online. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is again studying Word and Service ministry.

Imagine the future! See an ongoing renewal of the diaconate! Help churches fully understand diakonia, seek out candidates, theologically educate, support, and send forth diaconal ministers, deacons, and deaconesses into all sorts of places of service, interpreting and meeting needs in the world! Imagine diaconal ministers standing side by side with clergy, in solidarity with the laity, claiming Christ's call, seizing every opportunity for good news action, for gospel-centered Word and Service!

Relational diakonia

We have an incarnate, relational God. I will focus on two sources for relational diakonia: Wilhelm Loehe and Diakonia World Federation.

As part of the renewal of the diaconate in nineteenth century Europe, Wilhelm Loehe (1808-1872), a pastor in Neuendettelsau, Germany, created a wide range of charitable institutions and founded a deaconess community in 1854.[12] Loehe saw a great need for mercy: "Mercy is goodness, goodness is love, and, therefore, mercy is love. …Love is manifold…when it enters areas filled with misery and brings with it consolation, relief, and help, then it becomes mercy."[13] "Whenever love meets

9. The Hanover Report, 17 (III C. 48).

10. Ibid., 11 (III B, 17).

11. Ibid., 17 (III C, 50).

12. McArver, "A History of the Diaconate," 79. Loehe's experience was less than Theodore Fliedner's in Kaiserswerth, but he greatly influenced Lutherans in the United States, including the founding of Wartburg Theological Seminary.

13. Wilhelm Loehe, *Loehe on Mercy: Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy 1858–1860*, Adriane Dorr and Philip Hendrickson, eds., trans. Holger

misery, mercy is awakened. However, because misery is continually present in God's eyes, mercy cannot be an impulse, but it has to be a continuous inner movement of God, who created the world and did not cease to love it although it fell."[14]

Diakonia is relational because all are created by God, joined in Christ Jesus, and the Spirit moves among us. Therefore there is no room for the well-off (oppressor) to pity the needy (oppressed). Mercy is not a piety of pity. Those in need do not need guilt, but rather opportunity and economic justice. All, to use Loehe's language, are "miserable." All are in need of mercy. Whether the homeless person on the street or wealthy people inside big houses, who pretend they have no needs, each may have their own kind of misery. One becomes lonely and tired when facing misery. We may quickly respond to disaster, but we go to great lengths to avoid looking at the deeper needs and issues. Freed by Christ we can know the misery of the oppressor as well as the oppressed and recognize systemic sin which breaks relationship. Diakonia is rooted in the mercy of God.

Relational diakonia includes diversity in community. "Many of the diaconal ministries within our church arose in response to specific need in our societies. … Diaconal ministries are thus often expressions of particular historical and cultural realities…the flexibility and spontaneity that have characterized the development of many diaconal ministries over the last two hundred years should not be lost."[15]

Diakonia need not become distracted with differences in church structure. Unity need not exclude diversity. We have possibilities to learn from one another ecumenically and internationally, especially through the World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities, which is comprised of over sixty-five groups from Norway and Switzerland to Rwanda and Zimbabwe, from Brazil and Indonesia to Canada and the United States.[16]

Imagine the future! Being in relationship globally and ecumenically is central to diakonia today. In its "Theological Reflections," the World Federation wrote: "Community is basic to Christian life and takes many different forms in the life of the church. Although community is not unique to the diaconate, building community is always a distinct characteristic of the diaconate. …Community is both gift and task, blessing and burden, a place of joy and a place of struggle and suffering. Community may make possible a corporate witness that is more powerful than the voices of individuals. …In recovering the diaconal dimension of the Church, the diaconate will help the Church build a society that cares for people and empowers them."[17]

Powerful diakonia

We are freed from subservience for powerful servanthood. Martin Luther wrote: "A Christian is perfectly free, lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.[18] This is key.[19] "Being *diakonos* does not mean

Sonntag (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), 3.

14. Ibid., 4.

15. The Hanover Report, 15 (III B 35, 38).

16. http://www.diakonia-world.org

17. DIAKONIA World Federation Executive Committee, "Diaconal Reflections" (London: St. Andrew's House, 1998), 2–3.

18. Martin Luther, "A Treatise on Christian Liberty," in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), 251.

19. DIAKONIA, "Diaconal Reflections," 2. Diakonia is a calling accepted by

that the roles of leader and servant are reversed or abolished, but that those who lead…do so as servants, that is, as agents of Christ's salvation (Luke 22:27)."[20]

We imagine biblical diakonia through the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet (thus the towel and basin as sign in banner and pin). The towel is flexible and shaped by the feet. The future of powerful diakonia must be flexible and adaptable to serve as bridge between church and world, and be responsive to the changing needs of each. We embrace a ministry, which leaves itself open to the pain of others, rather than an act of servitude, subservience, or self-denial. The leadership of diaconal ministers is daring, dangerous, and life-giving.

Maria Harris includes "Diakonia: The Curriculum of Service" in her classic book, *Fashion Me a People.* She called for a strong understanding of diakonia as troublemaking! Acting for justice and empowerment! In an era of "compassion fatigue," she warned of the distortions of individualism and consumerism. We start with compassion, suffering *with*, which is life-giving and liberating.[21]

I remind seminarians that at some time in the future, they will find themselves in trouble. I add, "Make sure it is for the sake of the gospel." Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City has as its mission statement, "Trouble the Water, Heal the World." Trouble making and healing! I like that!

Those with hierarchical power, however, often seem threatened by powerful servants. Why? In the Spirit's economy, power is unlimited. Your having more power does not mean I have less and vice versa. God has broken down the walls of hostility and given us the ministry of reconciliation. In Christ we are called to a future of partnership and collaboration. Then ministry is multiplied. Can you imagine that?

Jesus often asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" Rather than presume, we too ask: "What do you need?" "What ideas do you have?" "What gifts do you want to use?"

Imagine the future! We need to be spokespersons for the gospel, for justice, and for global peace in a world fascinated by guns and terrorized by one another. We need to tell stories of Christ at work in powerful ways at the margins. We need to encourage, and give voice to people in such places telling their own stories. And we need to do theology—the church's theology—in and from those places. The future is now; we need to help create reconciled, hospitable, and trustworthy places for us to be different together. Imagine this gospel action of powerful diakonia.

Public diakonia

The church is called to be in the public world with public voice. "Private" literally means to be deprived of the public life. In ancient Greece women, children, and slaves were excluded from the public (full, human status) and confined to the private sphere.[22] "Public" was equated with prominence and influence, while private meant unseen, unheard, with limited or no influence. Diaconal ministers of the future need to be strong, courageous, articulate, capable, and prepared to relate to all kinds of people, those with prominence and

choice: "Servanthood in this sense is positive and a privilege. It is not to be confused with servitude or slavery!"

20. The Hanover Report, 10, (II A 10).

21. Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 144–147.

22. Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 18.

those dismissed by the world. Public servanthood means life among strangers with whom we are interdependent, whether or not we know or desire it. Throughout history, where has the church been? Where is it now seen to be present?

Some would claim that the private world has the power today: private corporations, private schools for those who can afford them, or private, gated communities where people can protect their private property. A diaconal church is called to action in places of power in the public world (that is, open to all), particularly on behalf of those without access.

There have been times when Lutherans have huddled behind the doors of the church, some doing so because of a misunderstanding of the constitutional mandate of separation of church and state.[23] Others see the church as a refuge from contemporary social chaos. Others think the church, with dwindling economic resources, needs to cut back on social ministry programs. Other less conscious reasons may lie beneath—such as racism or classism.[24] "A ministry 'to the periphery' is central to the New Testament message." Even though, "ministry to outsiders is not equally valued among church folk."[25]

The baptized go forth from the worshipping assembly into ministry in the public world every day. The Statement of Purpose of the ELCA Constitution begins: "The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world." This includes "…standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs."[26]

The baptized are in the world, capable of seeing needs and issues to be addressed. Lest churches be relegated to the private sphere, the church of the future needs to take seriously its missional and diaconal role, which therefore means learning for life, seminary for everyone. Wartburg Theological Seminary is embarking on a new adventure. Building on the core belief that theological education and formation are for the whole church, Wartburg Seminary is creating new ways for all the baptized, of all vocations, and from all locations to access theological education through both online and intensive on-campus learning opportunities, knowing that people have different learning needs for their ministries in daily life.

The current ELCA Word and Service Task Force is raising possibilities for us anew: "Christ the servant leads God's church into ministries that serve the needs of God's world…God in Christ through the Holy Spirit lives in intimate solidarity with every suffering person. Therefore, wherever one works to announce God's forgiveness, to heal, to bring peace, to establish justice, to harbor hope and proclaim promise, there one serves Christ himself and there the servant makes visible to the served the God who insistently and selflessly is with us. Such is service to "the least of these" (Matt 25:40). All of this mandate is diaconal."[27] What about a year focusing on being a diaconal church?

Forty-five years ago in the Lutheran Church in America, Thure-Gengt Molan-

23. The ELCA policy is really one of institutional separation and functional interaction.

24. Erik M Heen, "Biblical Theology for Diaconal Ministry" in *From Word and Sacrament,* 53–54.

25. Ibid., 54–56.

26. Constitution of the ELCA, Chapter 4. Statement of Purpose 4.01 and 4.01 c and e.

27. ELCA, "Word and Service Task Force Update Four," Feb. 25, 2015. "Frequently Asked Questions," 1–2.

der urged the recovery of the fundamental nature of Christian ministry: "The Church must become a diaconal Church in the deepest and most forward-looking sense, or it will not be the Church."[28] In 1984, to fulfill the responsibility assigned by the Commission for a New Lutheran Church, the Design Task Force on Specific Ministry in its final report summarized: "There is one ministry which God has established and given to the whole people of God." They recommended two offices of public ministry, mutual and interdependent, the "Office of Word and Sacrament" and the "Office of Word and Service."[29] In the fall of 1992, the Work Group on Diaconal Ministry reported to The Task Force on the Study of Ministry of the then new ELCA that "Diaconal Ministry of Word and Service" would serve inside the structures of the church and also outside the structures of the church inside the mission of the church.

In affirming "Public Diakonia" we dare not miss the intricacies of the particular. We could be tempted to separate the call to faith from the call to ministry in daily life. God is not detached from the human situations in which people are immersed. There are not different kinds of grace. Jesus Christ's incarnation means not only that he put on flesh but that he entered and still enters the very specific places we live and work and relate to each other. It is in those places that the gospel meets the world's great need. Our callings (our *vocatio*) are rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We need to be able to name the human predicaments—complex, personal, communal, and systemic—in our daily arenas and speak grace there. We are transformed by grace in those very places, in the languages of daily life, or the "vernacular," as Martin Luther put it.[30]

Imagine! Through faith in Jesus Christ all of the baptized, together with called, authorized, and public diaconal ministers of Word and Service, freed and empowered for gospel action and for public diakonia!

For reflection and discussion:

To whom and to what are you called to be faithful with a diaconal heart?

How can church authorities seize the opportunity to fully utilize diaconal ministry?

Relationally, how can we meet the miseries of the world with the mercy of God?

How can we go from being threatened by each other's power toward powerful diakonia?

What are creative possibilities for the church to serve diaconally in the public world?

28. Minutes of the *Fifth Biennial Convention of the Lutheran Church in America,* Minneapolis, June 25–July 2, 1970. (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the Lutheran Church in America, 1970), 449.

29. "Final Report of the Design Task Force on Specific Ministry for the Commission for a New Lutheran Church." This task force met in 1983–1984. The report was not adopted and after the beginning of the ELCA in January 1988, a six-year task force on the Study of Ministry was commissioned to deal with ministry complexities. Its Final Report and Actions, "Together for Ministry," in 1993 included diaconal ministers, associates in ministry, and deaconesses.

30. Norma Cook Everist, *70 Images of Grace in the New Testament that Make All the Difference in Daily Life* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

Reflections on the Diaconate: For a More Diaconal Church for the Sake of the World

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I have been eavesdropping on conversations about the diaconate. In some places it sounds like the diaconate is a new thing, about which folks in the church have never heard. At other times people talk as though the diaconate is an anachronism, because the only experiences they have had are of unmarried women wearing habits much like nuns. Others seem to think that if we were to lift up the diaconate and give it greater recognition in the church, we would somehow diminish the ministry of pastors or of the laity. Some upon first learning about deaconesses and deacons find their hearts resonating, because they have felt somehow called to this ministry but did not know it had a name. Still others view the diaconate as the best (or worst) kept secret in the church, a largely invisible and under-appreciated force with great potential to help the church be more faithful in carrying out God's mission in the world.

It is true that many North American Lutherans (and perhaps other Christians as well) have not ever used the "d" words—diaconate, diaconal, *diakonia,* deaconess, deacon. Still they have had a sense that their Christian walk does include caring for their neighbors near and far. Growing up, I saw this in my parents and it took many forms. My mother was quick to take a pot of soup to a neighbor who was ill. My father joined a cadre of farmers, who left their own fields to harvest wheat for a friend who was near death following a serious accident. After my mother died, several women wrote about how she listened to their troubles and gave them encouragement and advice. At my father's funeral many told stories about how he was a good neighbor and good friend. For most of her life, my mother was part of a group of women who quilted to raise money first to ship eggs, garden produce, and home canned goods to a Lutheran orphanage 100 miles away. Later, when the orphanage was no more, they donated money to support various Lutheran social service agencies. My mother and father cared for my grandparents as they aged and became ill. Both my parents served as adult leaders in 4-H, and through this and other county extension programs they helped spread good practices in homemaking, gardening, and farming—caring not only for their own family and neighbors but also for the earth itself. My parents did not know the words, but they clearly were part of God's diaconal mission in the world.

I think too of the people who sit with me for the 2-7 a.m. shift at local churches, in order to provide a warm, safe place to sleep for women in our town who live without homes. Others help to bring dinner, prepare breakfast, assist for the other shifts, or organize volunteers.

There are the women who gather from several churches one day every week to make quilts—hundreds of quilts each year—for Lutheran World Relief. And there are the men and women who build houses and remodel spaces to provide affordable housing. There is also the young man who, before he goes to work, shovels snow from the driveway and sidewalks of a neighbor who had a heart attack. I know a university professor who spends much of his volunteer time working toward better race relations in our community, an attorney who advocates for better mental health services, and a homemaker who always raises the issue of recycling. Then there are the children, who every Sunday during the offertory procession eagerly bring forward the boxes and cans they and others from the congregation have brought for the citywide food pantry. Very few of these folks would use the "d" words. Clearly, however, they are part of God's diaconal mission in the world.

We end our liturgies with the words "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." Recently I asked a group of people how they did that. They talked about the things they did at church—serving on committees, teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, or ushering. Some described how in their daily lives they looked for opportunities to talk about their faith—to witness. Interestingly when I asked some folks from the congregation where I am a member that same question, they included some of the activities mentioned above. We have a deaconess on the staff and we have had several deaconesses and a diaconal minister as members over the years. Maybe there is a clue here? Perhaps it has been having members of the diaconate in their midst that has helped them to see their service in their local community and beyond as part of their Christian calling, the way they "serve the Lord" in the world.

If we believe that the church exists to embody the Servant Christ in the world, so that all may know God's love and share in the fullness of life that God desires for all, it seems to me that it is essential that we consider again how the diaconate can provide important leadership for this crucial calling. The goal is to unleash the people of God to "Go in peace. Serve the Lord."

Ecumenical and global perspectives

While North American Lutherans have generally not used the word "diakonia" in its understanding of ministry, Lutherans and Christians in other places throughout the world have done so. Drawing upon the ministry of the Servant Christ and the life of the early church (as well as upon the revival of the diaconate as part of the Inner Mission movement among German Lutherans in the mid-nineteenth century), The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has for many years used the term diakonia for a wide variety of ministries, ranging from individual care of people in congregations to health and social service institutions to international aid and development. The World Council of Churches (WCC) also has employed the term diakonia to encompass much of its work of aid, development, and advocacy, often under the heading of "Justice, Peace, and the Care of Creation." Both the LWF and the WCC view diakonia not as an add-on but as an essential dimension of the life of the church.

Much of the consultation and theologizing in both the LWF and the WCC over the years has been about diaconal work but not about the diaconate itself. Indeed most of the diaconal work throughout the world is not done by deacons.[1] It is the

1. I am using "deacon" to include dea-

whole church, all the baptized, who are called to this essential work in the world. But those who are serious about Christ's ministry of diakonia for the sake of the world must explore what kind of leadership will be most helpful for this work.

In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC published *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM).* In this proposal about ministry was a call to revive the diaconate as a way to better engage in mission for a changing world and to express in a fuller way the unity of the church. This document stimulated much discussion within church bodies and ecumenically. The vision was to have within the ministry of the church someone—a deacon—who could represent the whole church's calling as servant in the world. Additionally, the liturgical roles of the deacon, for example, reading the scriptures, preaching, leading the prayers of the people, and sending the people out to serve, would more clearly demonstrate the interdependence of worship and service in the church's life.[2]

As a result of these conversations, some churches, in which the diaconate had been only a transitional state on the way to the presbyterate, established or affirmed a permanent or perpetual diaconate. The Roman Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church—USA, and other churches in the Anglican Communion all now have ordained permanent deacons. Other churches looked for ways to bring diaconal communities or orders, which had been on the edges of the church's life, more into the center of its ministry. For example, Lutheran churches in Finland, Norway, and Sweden all had deaconess and deacon communities which were very involved in diaconal work, but whose members were consecrated and not ordained, and who did not usually take liturgical roles. Ecumenical conversations between the Anglicans in the United Kingdom and several Lutheran church bodies of Northern Europe birthed an ordained diaconate with renewed involvement in congregational worship. Still other churches established diaconates as a new form of ministry. The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil added ordained diaconal ministers to its fourfold ministry, which also included pastors, evangelists, and catechists. All four ministries are considered equal in status, share the same salary scale, and require the same basic seminary education with special courses for each distinctive ministry.

Concurrently, there have been increased efforts to renew the understanding of the "deaconhood of all believers" and to develop more resources to help individuals and congregations realize this aspect of their Christian calling. The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, for example, established the "Department of Diakonia" which encompasses the diaconal ministers, the deaconess community, and all of the church's health care and social service agencies and institutions. It also has a commitment to help mobilize people in congregations to do diaconal work. The Church of Sweden requires each congregation every year to articulate strategies and plans for diakonia as well as for worship and education. The Church of Norway has written a comprehensive "Plan for Diakonia," which assists congregations

conesses, diaconal ministers, and deacons, that is, all those who are formally educated, officially set apart (by consecration, ordination, or commissioning), and recognized as public ministers in the church.

2. See *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), # 31 and the attached commentary.

and individuals to be involved in diaconal work in their own contexts.

In preparation for its 2003 Assembly, the LWF convened a group around the theme "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World" to explore three specific areas of human suffering: poverty, violence, and HIV/AIDS. In a letter to LWF churches, the consultation reaffirmed that "diakonia is central to what it means to be church" and that diakonia is the calling of the whole people of God.[3] In the context of affirming diakonia as the calling of the whole people of God, the consultation also spoke to the importance of leadership:

> Leadership at all levels is essential, leaders who equip all Christians to take up their call to serve...Churches should initiate and strengthen education for diakonia. As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church's ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the Church.[4]

In 2005 the LWF convened another consultation, *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church,* to look at existing models for ordering diaconal ministry and try to set parameters for demarcating a "space" where diaconal ministry can be located in the overall ministry of the church. Recognizing that the concept of a threefold ministry (bishop, pastor, deacon) is controversial in some parts of the Lutheran church, the consultation articulated the assumption that however that "space" might be understood, it should be:

- Solidly based on the gospel as testified in the Bible;
- Accountable to and informed by basic tenets of the Lutheran Reformation; and
- Open to contextual variations.

The participants and presentations represented a wide range of churches with a variety of approaches to ordering diaconal ministry.

The final statement of the consultation advocated ordaining those called to this ministry as a way of demonstrating that the diaconate is an integral part of the one (public) ministry of the church. At the same time the statement affirms the "deaconhood of all believers," that is, the calling of all the baptized to be involved in diakonia. It also pointed to the importance of seeing diaconal and pastoral ministries as mutual and complementary, while having different emphases.

Drawing on the work of these two consultations and the mission document of 2004,[5] the LWF published *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment—An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia.* This document states:

> Diakonia grows out of worship and aims at thanksgiving to God for God's indescribable gift. …Diakonia is a response to concrete situations of suffering, need and injustice, the fulfillment of the commandment of love, and in all that is an expression of what the Church believes in and confesses: the grace of God—for the

3. The Lutheran World Federation, "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World," A Letter from the Global Consultation, November 2002, 2. http://elcic.ca/Documents/documents/PropheticDiakonia-Consultation_Diakonia2002.pdf Presentations and reports from that consultation were later published as the monograph, *Prophetic Diakonia: "For the Healing of the World"* (Geneva: LWF, 2003).

4. Ibid, 5.

5. *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission* (Geneva: LWF, 2004).

healing of the world.

> Diakonia is thus an intrinsic element of being Church and cannot be reduced to an activity by certain committed persons or made necessary by external social conditions. Diakonia is deeply related to what the Church celebrates in its liturgy and announces in its preaching. In the same way, liturgy and proclamation relate to diakonia. The communion (*koinonia*) of the Church is made visible through its three main expressions (Celebration or *leiturgia*, Proclamation or *kerygma*, and Service or *diakonia*).[6]

These three "expressions" are all interrelated, supporting and stimulating each other with no hierarchy among them.

Diakonia in Context also emphasizes the importance of competent leadership on all levels (individual, congregational, institutional, and international) in the context of the "deaconhood of all believers." It also makes a case for the diaconate as an order of ministry, so that the church's leadership reflects the intrinsic dimension of diakonia in the life of the church. Deacons are seen as taking the lead in organizing the diaconal work of a local congregation and also having a role in its worship life. It is further suggested that consideration of an ordained diaconate not focus on the threefold ministry but rather on what it means to be church in today's world.[7]

The experience of the ELCA

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) came into being in the midst of discussions around the WCC's *BEM* document. Consideration of the diaconate was a lively part of those discussions. Around that time, the late Tom Dorris, a deacon rostered in the Metropolitan New York Synod and one of at least twenty-six deacons whom the ELCA inherited from the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), wrote "Reflections on the Diaconate in the ELCA."[8] He articulated a dream for the diaconate that would be part of the church's public ministry and be "accountable and available to the institutional church in ways most of the baptized are not and should not be." He further suggested that this public/representative ministry be separated from issues of education, professional qualifications, and employment practices. (AELC deacons had extensive preparation but not in traditional, accredited schools and, for the most part, were not paid by the church.)

Since the Commission for the New Lutheran Church (the group that worked out the specifics when the ELCA was formed) was able to resolve neither the issue of deacons nor the role of other so-called lay rosters as inherited from the predecessor church bodies, the newly formed ELCA appointed a task force to study ministry. The report of that task force details an understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God and explains how a diaconate can enhance that ministry.[9] Originally the task force recommended

6. *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 29.

7. Ibid., 71–74.

8. Tom Dorris, "Reflections on the Diaconate in the ELCA," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 18 (August 1991): 281–284.

9. *Together for Ministry,* Final Report and Actions on the Study of Ministry 1988–1993 Incorporating the Task Force Final Report and Actions of the Board of the Division for Ministry and the 1993 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

that the ELCA establish ordained diaconal ministers, but the final action of the 1993 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized consecrated diaconal ministers. While the Deaconess Community was kept intact in the ELCA, the other "lay ministries" from the predecessor church bodies were combined into the roster of associates in ministry. These actions left the dream of diaconal ministry partly unrealized and left many in the ELCA still confused about the status of the "lay" rostered leaders.

Dreaming and discussing continued. A consultation on the ministries of deaconesses, associates in ministry, and diaconal ministers in 2007 precipitated another look at the structure. Eventually a task force was formed, and that group is developing recommendations for the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. At present it appears that those recommendations will be for a combined roster under the title "deacon." It is hoped that this new designation will help the ELCA claim diakonia as an essential part of its mission and will provide leaders for that aspect of Christ's mission in the world. The task force is still working on details for transitioning to the new roster status and on specifics of candidacy and preparation. It appears the recommendation for preparation normally will include a Masters degree from an ELCA seminary.

If these proposals are adopted, there are several issues that need to be faced as a deacon roster is implemented:

- How can the whole church be awakened to the importance of diakonia in its life and mission?
- How can the church be prepared to receive deacons as leaders in its diaconal mission?
- How can pastors be helped to see deacons as mutual ministers with them in the gospel?
- How can deacons, while still a minority in the church's public ministry, be given the visibility they need to lead all the baptized?
- What liturgical roles should deacons have?
- What are the financial implications and justice issues that need to be addressed, so that there can be compensation equity, not leaving the deacon as always the most vulnerable one when money becomes tight? Can there also be a place for non-stipendary ministry?
- What changes need to be made in seminaries if they are to be the primary places of preparation for the diaconate?

A decision on the entrance rite will likely be postponed to a future assembly. While there are many similarities between the rites of consecration and ordination, the question about which rite is appropriate for deacons seems to be loaded. While many of the ELCA's Lutheran global partners and other church bodies with whom the ELCA has full communion agreements ordain deacons, deaconesses, or diaconal ministers, some in the ELCA believe ordination should be reserved only for pastors. Still others believe that ordination is essential, if deacons are to be a full and equal order in the church's ministry. Clearly more conversation is needed around this question.

Conclusions and personal observations

Some are asking why the ELCA should reconsider the idea of the diaconate, which was already decided in 1993. Much has changed in the intervening years. It is far beyond the scope of this article to give an analysis of the church and the world, in which we are seeking to carry out Christ's mission today. We are

a somewhat anxious church. Our membership is declining as are our financial resources. People often feel powerless to stem the tide of decline in the church, or to address the multiplicity of problems in the society—locally, nationally, and globally. There is increasing concern about the high cost of traditional seminary education and the large debt which seminary graduates carry. Additionally, many ELCA congregations find it difficult to employ a pastor full time, much less consider adding someone in diaconal ministry. Some seismic changes are happening or about to happen in the church. What comes next is unclear. Many are asking what kind of church leadership will be needed in the approaching era.

Perhaps this is the opportune time for the church to reclaim its diaconal mission. I like the way the Church of Norway articulates that mission in its "Plan for Diakonia":

- Loving your neighbor;
- Creating inclusive communities;
- Caring for creation; and
- Working for justice.

From my perspective, the diaconate exists to help the church better live out this call to diakonia. Sometimes those in the diaconate are the "doers" of that ministry. They do the actual "hands on" work. At other times they are primarily "equippers," that is, educators, facilitators, cheerleaders, or evaluators for the diaconal work of the whole people of God. At still other times, they serve as living reminders that the Servant Christ calls the whole church to diakonia. For me, the important question is: how can the church best shape its public ministry, so that its diaconal mission can be served and the whole people of God are better mobilized for mission in the world?

One genius of the diaconate is that it does not always fit neatly into well-defined categories. Historically, globally, and ecumenically, it has been "messy." Sometimes it has been out in front, leading the church where it needs to go. Sometimes it has needed to be adaptable enough to fill in those places where people have fallen through the cracks in the ministries of the church. And sometimes the diaconate has needed to speak a critical word also to the church, when it devalues or ignores its diaconal calling or when the church itself becomes an agent of oppression. How can diaconal ministry be shaped so that it can remain pioneering, pliable, and prophetic?

Some have said that this is an exciting time to be church, because God is doing a new thing among us. Deacons are indeed the kind of leaders that are needed for such a time as this.

For reflection and discussion:

How do you think the whole church can be awakened to the importance of diakonia in its life and mission?

When you think of diakonia as part of Christ's mission in the world, what situations and circumstances most need to be addressed?

If you think of diakonia as loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, working for justice, and caring for creation, how are you involved in these activities personally, in your congregation, and through the larger church?

What kind of leadership would best help you and your congregation to engage in diakonia in the world?

How might the church's diaconal mission be lifted up in your congregation—at worship, in preaching, through education, and with activities?

An Evolving Diaconate for an Evolving Church

Diane Marten
Deaconess, Director of Education and Formation
Lutheran Deaconess Association, (2001–2013)

Come and see

What makes *that* woman engage in a multi-year process of formation and education, so that she might work unnoticed by the larger church, for a small paycheck, and become unbelievably fulfilled? Why would *that* man with a perfectly good career and huge skill set feel so compelled to seek more training and begin a new direction in life? What makes *that* student choose a life in the diaconate rather than (or in addition to) ordination? Like the disciples, they ask: "Rabbi, where do you live?"

"Come and see," responds Jesus. Therefore that man and that woman follow Jesus on a meaningful, tough, tiring, fulfilling lifestyle of servant leadership, discovering that Jesus lives in all kinds of places hidden from, or ignored by, much of the world.

Looking for where Jesus lives and responding in loving service is the diaconal task. The vision is both captivating and catching. Diakonia is not a job description; it is a calling that catches a glimpse of both the suffering and risen Christ, and goes there to welcome and serve him.

Follow

Deaconess Heidi's passion for justice led her to Costa Rica, where she hosts students and congregations, taking them to where Jesus lives, among the poorest of the poor—where cooking might be done on an open fire in the yard and where bread and wine are shared at God's table. The poor are true missionaries, who convert Heidi's guests to a new understanding of Jesus' holistic mission of shalom.

Next came Amy. When she studied with Heidi, Deaconess Amy lived in a barrio, where refugees from Nicaragua built lean-to huts to keep out the hot sun and where they could find day labor, so their children could eat. Amy bought crayons and paper, told Bible stories, sang songs in Spanish and started a Sunday school. She listened to mothers' stories about crossing the border, leaving family behind. Later she and her Nicaraguan husband moved to Pennsylvania, where Amy was invited to be a parent-liaison between families and the local school. Her Spanish speaking and having an understanding heart were put to good use, bridging church and community across cultural divides.

Then came Jessica, who loved going to summer camp. She met Amy, a camp counselor, and heard about the Lutheran Deaconess Association's (LDA) diaconate. Deaconess Jessica shows a passion for worship, youth work, and the environment. Now she serves a Lutheran camping organization as program director, bridging God's love of nature with God's love of people.

Then came Johannah, who saw Jessica's approach to camp leadership with excitement and kindness. She heard Jessica tell about the diaconate and then

sensed her own call to diakonia. Now, in the middle of her formation process, Johannah is preparing to become a social worker. She will bring resources to an aging population that is often hidden from the community. And she will help the church have a better understanding and care for those who are isolated.

Both men and women seek the diaconate as a basin, as one place in the church to pour out their gifts in creative ways. Many diaconal people sense a call to serve early in their lives, but it is not until they meet a deaconess or deacon, or read about their ministries, that they discover a name for that calling. You cannot be what you cannot see.

It is not unusual for a long-time Lutheran to say, "What's a deaconess? What's a deacon?" The diaconate is largely invisible. There are fewer than 1000 deaconesses, deacons, and diaconal ministers in the four Lutheran diaconates in the United States—1000 out of 6.4 million—less than 0.02 percent of the Lutheran population. When a Lutheran diaconate is such a well-kept secret in the church, it is amazing that people still choose to take up the basin and towel. But when they do, their response is evidence that God is at work, inviting people to come and see.

The diaconal heart

There is something inherent to diakonia—it must be "embodied" service. Diakonia gets personal. In Mark 1:13, Jesus is in the wilderness, tempted by Satan, surrounded by wild beasts. The angels "ministered" to him. Some translations use the term "waited on," or "served him." The Greek word is *dihkonoun,* diakonia. The angels "deaconed" him. What did they do exactly? What would you do? Wash his feet? Feed him? Sing him to sleep? Sit in silence? Make a comfortable bed?

Both men and women seek the diaconate as a basin, as one place in the church to pour out their gifts in creative ways.

Clothe him? Give him water? Listen to his experience? Hold his hands in prayer? Be a loving presence? Those are all personal, diaconal responses.

All kinds of people, including Christian people, do the tasks that deacons and deaconesses do. It simply takes willing hands and compassionate hearts. At 5 am on Sunday mornings, a very kind man in my congregation cooks breakfast for the handful of women in transition who spend cold nights on mattress pads in one of the classrooms. I help him serve. I am the deaconess, but he is indeed diaconal. In fact, it takes eight volunteers to host those homeless women for just one night. Multiply this by the seven different churches each week, and you'll count fifty-six volunteers. Match that with another fifty-six volunteers for the men's program and you will see a community of people who care about homelessness. A deacon cannot serve everybody. It takes the church.

One of my key roles as a deaconess is to sit at the table with the women, listening to their stories, and finding out what it is like for them to move from place to place every night and to carry their life in a plastic bag. We are learning to listen and to serve, and we are discovering how Christ is present in those early morning breakfasts. I can remind other volunteers about the connection between the task

and the good news that Jesus cares, right there at the kitchen table. But if I could do anything more, I would stand and cheer for those everyday Christians, and I would cheer for the courage of those women who ask for resources.

It is not particularly the mechanics of the job that make it diaconal. It is the heart. It is the perspective. It is the awareness that Christ is hidden in the needy neighbor. And that makes all the difference. Even when diaconal work becomes administrative, a step or two removed from the neighbor, and when committees and meetings fill the days, even there the servant bends. There is a kind of joy that twinkles behind diaconal eyes, when kneeling down to tie the shoes of a little one or standing on tip-toes for public speaking. There is time to see Jesus, laughing, crying, offering a hug at the right time, or backing off when necessary—not as an additional diaconal task—but central to it.

Jesus, where do you live? Come and see! People still respond to that invitation. They serve Jesus in a personal way and with a variety of skills, but with the same heart of compassion and commitment. How might we cultivate that kind of heart?

Some history…

The diaconate began in the time of the New Testament and the early church and has continued in various forms throughout Christian history. But during the Industrial Revolution, as European churches responded to new social needs, the diaconate was given new life. In the mid-1800s, German Lutheran deaconesses were trained as nurses, caring for people who were sick, disabled, or orphaned. Some of those nurse-deaconesses came to the United States in the late 1890s to serve in Lutheran institutions. The women wore uniforms, lived in community, were unpaid, and did not marry. Some were sent to foreign countries to serve with other missionaries.

As American society changed, the church needed other kinds of help. The LDA was formed in 1919 as an independent organization, to serve with and alongside the Lutheran Church—the historical roots are connected to the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. As with European deaconesses, the LDA trained women as nurses and matrons for their institutions. By mid-century, congregations experienced rapid growth. The LDA responded by moving their training to Valparaiso University, emphasizing social work, theology, psychology, and education as ways to prepare deaconesses to serve on church staffs, teach in parochial schools, organize youth work, manage Sunday schools, lead women's Bible study, and make visits to the home-bound.

By the late 1970s, however, fewer congregations were calling full-time deaconesses, and fewer women were entering a deaconess program. LDA deaconesses found themselves serving in many Lutheran denominations. Along with that, ordination, professional careers, and a host of other Lutheran training options became available. The role of a permanent diaconate was only one choice among many for Christian service. While church bodies continued to struggle with various titles and roles for non-ordained ministry, diaconal leaders never gave up tending social concerns and caring for those who are most vulnerable.

Given that history and context, the LDA stretched beyond congregationally based ministry and ever-decreasing official calls by church bodies, flinging their diaconate into a wider world that still needs a touch of compassion and hope. Because the LDA was a free-standing Lutheran organization, it was flexible

enough to respond to changing times. Deaconesses affirmed their servant callings as theologians, pastors, social workers, nurses, therapists, teachers in public and parochial schools, chaplains, attorneys, advocates, camp directors, and directors of non-profit agencies. They became musicians and worship specialists, wives and mothers. They served part-time and as active volunteers. They began to see Jesus in more and more places of need.

Once again, in the late 1990s, the LDA's flexibility helped deaconesses adapt. With bold intentionality the LDA diaconal community began asking questions: What positions are we training deaconesses for? What knowledge, skills, and attitudes are needed to prepare people for servant leadership to the church and to the world? How might the process change if the LDA included men? What is essential to diakonia? The community sought direction from a team of educators, deaconesses, LDA staff, pastors, theologians, supervisors, and other lay leaders to formulate a process of training for the diaconate with an eye to the future. Building on a theological cornerstone, hallmarks of the diaconate, and promises made at consecration, the LDA designed a process that featured practical and educational competencies.

Competencies and community

The LDA dreamers recognized that deaconesses are critical to the process. While formal classes in theology are important, living into a diaconal identity can only be done through connections with the diaconal community. Practical, supervised experiences hone the diaconal skill and vision, particularly in dialogue with other diaconal people. Tending the spiritual life—a life of intentional prayer, worship, Bible study, and spiritual direction—gives strength for the journey.

As the first director of education and formation, the dreamers handed me a thick document and said, "Make it happen!" They gave me the heart and skeleton, and my job was to put muscles and veins and flesh on the process. It took two more years and hours of dialogue before the new design took shape. We discovered some advantages: the process could be individualized; students could enter at many ages or stages of life, take courses at the BA or MA level, bring in previous experience, move through at their own pace, and serve in many settings. We discovered that the process could be offered to men—the LDA now has one diaconate with two communities. We also discovered some disadvantages: consecration into the LDA's diaconate does not result automatically in membership on a church roster. However, with intentional planning, an LDA student could meet or exceed requirements for certain rostered categories of Lutheran church bodies.

Tending the spiritual life—a life of intentional prayer, worship, Bible study, and spiritual direction—gives strength for the journey.

The LDA's competencies are organized into four areas: theology, ministry (or diaconal work), spiritual life, and diaconal community. The competencies may be addressed in a variety of ways:

through course work, projects, papers, reflections on intentional experiences, workshops, or other training situations. Competencies are assessed by qualified people, including course instructors, Clinical Pastoral Education and intern supervisors, LDA staff, or deaconesses. Documentation of each completed part is compiled in a portfolio and presented during a final interview with an LDA committee. Many students have used their portfolios at job interviews, documenting their experience and providing summaries of feedback from those who know their work and ministry.

> Even with a solid foundation in theology and great skills, it is difficult to sustain ministry in deep waters without an anchor.

Formation and education are, of course, ongoing in the diaconal life. The competencies help students with a starting point to grow in a life of service by addressing questions like these:

Theology: How has God revealed Godself in the Bible? What is God's good news in a difficult situation? How does one's personal story intersect with God's story? Students begin to articulate the gospel to people of different ages and in various situations.

Ministry (work): How might you identify and work in mutuality with other partners in this ministry? How is God's work of justice and reconciliation part of my work? Is my response appropriate to the request, and am I willing to be served by those I seek to serve? Practicing basic pastoral care, communicating effectively, providing leadership, and coordinating volunteers are diaconal skills that enhance any profession.

Spiritual Life: What is God inviting me to do or to be in this situation? What kind of personal devotion, corporate prayer, intentional study, or dialogue will help me grow in this experience? How might I plan worship or devotions that engage others in their relationship with God? Through spiritual direction, counseling, and conversation with trusted others, students engage in ongoing discernment.

Diaconal Community: How might I grow in respect for others' ways of thinking and doing, openness to compromise, and giving and receiving forgiveness? How can we move through conflict to consensus? How might I become more aware of my own cultural lens, and see how it helps or hinders relationships with people from other cultures? Students are encouraged to attend ecumenical diaconal gatherings to learn and listen to a worldwide movement of diakonia.[1] Moreover, being in community is in itself an experience in group process, providing a training ground to create meaningful, supportive communities in particular ministry settings.

A sustaining community

The diaconate is a community, a group of deaconesses and deacons, who

1. The diaconal movement is global and ecumenical. See www.diakonia-world.org; www.diakonia-asiapacific.org; www.dotac.diakonia-world.org; and www.drae.diakonia-world.org.

make a commitment to lives of faith and service. Even with a solid foundation in theology and great skills, it is difficult to sustain ministry in deep waters without an anchor. Most diaconal people do not live "in community" with each other. With a great variety of work settings, both inside and outside the church, the community finds ways to remain connected. Regular contact, in person or in virtual gatherings, allows members to share ministry stories, learn from and support each other, provide mentoring, and maintain a shared vision.

It is essential that other deaconesses and deacons be an integral part of the formation process. Students learn from diaconal members how to live in grace with diverse opinions, how to balance time alone with time together, and how to care for themselves as well as others. Belonging to a community, especially during formation, brings insights and skills that overflow into the congregations or agencies of service. The diaconal community is itself a sign to the church that in a "go-it-alone world" we need each other.

LDA deaconesses and deacons point to their community as a key place of identity and belonging. Peter Block's ideas about community as *belonging* ring true for them.[2] He writes: "We are in community each time we find a place where we belong. Belonging means that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. It is the experience of being at home in a broad sense, instead of forever wandering, looking for that place where we belong." Because they are sprinkled widely across the country, the LDA community becomes a home, reminding members who they are and to whom they belong. The LDA's diaconate therefore seeks to nurture each community as a place of belonging, not only as a community of servants, but also as an experience to be shared and cultivated in the places they serve.

"Another meaning of the word *belong,*" writes Block, "has to do with being an owner. Something belongs to me, and I will build and nurture it." The LDA's diaconate has produced high commitment among members, who foster a sense of emotional ownership and accountability for community. This sense of belonging and ownership becomes an attitude that comes naturally as they build other communities in church and work settings.

Block's third meaning of *belonging* is a "longing to be—to be more fully present, to be more authentic, to find a deeper purpose in all that we do." The diaconate seeks to create communities, within which longings for meaning and purpose can be fulfilled, not just as an end in itself but for a church that longs to serve a world in need.

In the world

Remember Amy? She is the embodiment of the diaconate. She understands her ministry as a bridge of hospitality between cultures, done in the neighborhood, church, and school. Many LDA deaconesses and deacons do not serve in public and officially rostered ministry. But they are keeping the heart of the church

belonging is a "longing to be—to be more fully present, to be more authentic, to find a deeper purpose."

2. For this and the following quotes, Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008), xii.

pumping without fanfare. They are leading Bible studies, serving on prayer teams, or hosting dinners in local congregations. They are hidden in human service professions as nurses, counselors, spiritual directors, non-profit managers, disability coordinators, special education teachers, prison chaplains, and homeless ministry coordinators and volunteers—places where people most need compassion. There is nothing unique about what they do. Everyone and anyone can do it. In fact, the diaconate is a sign and equipper to a church that longs to serve.

Can the diaconate move into the future? Can it evolve to meet the challenges of a changing church? Emphatically yes! Why?

- Because the church is moving outside its doors and the diaconate is already there, ready to lead and inspire.
- Because God calls the whole church into servanthood and we need a variety of gifts for service. The diaconate expands the church's vision.
- Because people need to know that what they are doing is truly Christ-like service. They need to know they count. The diaconate is a sign of that reality.
- Because the church needs servant leaders who are willing to roll up their sleeves. The diaconate can form and support those leaders.
- Because men and women still long for community and to find, even in unlikely places, others who share their vision of servanthood. The diaconate nourishes a sense of community.
- Because the diaconate has insights to share. The diaconate is called to help the church do the simple graces for the sake of the world God so much loves.

Yes! The diaconate remains a steady, beating heart in complex communities and that is our future.

For reflection and discussion:

How might we cultivate a diaconal heart of compassion?

If "you cannot be what you cannot see," in what ways can the church make the diaconate more visible?

What do you see as advantages and disadvantages of a free-standing Lutheran diaconate?

How can Lutheran church bodies more effectively affirm deaconesses, deacons, and diaconal ministers?

Baptismal Vocation as an Impetus for Diakonia

Shera W. Nesheim
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Heart River Lutheran Church, Mandan, North Dakota

The future of diaconal ministry involves the church investing in an understanding of vocation rooted in diakonia. Diakonia (service) is people's faith put into action when we serve and care for "the least of these." Diaconal ministry is the work of both diaconal ministers and the entire baptized people of God as they embrace diakonia in and through their vocational call from God.

When water and word wash us with God's grace, we receive new life and become part of the body of Christ. No matter our vocation, God strengthens us in our baptism for our daily work together as Christ's hands and feet in the world. In baptism we are healed, made new, freed, and reconciled in Christ, and therefore we are freed for diakonia, freed to serve the neighbor.

Martin Luther's understanding of vocation is rooted in the premise that we all have "holy callings," in which we all can claim our baptismal identity to serve God where we are—whether we are monks, priests, fathers, mothers, daughters, brothers, accountants, pastors, or English teachers. These roles and relationships can be viewed as life stations. According to Luther, it does not matter which station we find ourselves in, rather what matters is how we live out our station—this is our vocation.[1]

All Christians are called to serve God in and through their daily work, with emphasis on whom and how we serve. We are called to use our God-given gifts in the spheres that our lives touch: school, work, government, business, home, and church. When we use our gifts to love and serve others outside the doors of the church, God uses us to usher the kingdom of God into the world. We do this not seeking salvation, but rather because we know that our neighbors truly *need* to be served. The love and hope we have found in Christ compels us to share it with others. We live out vocation when we bring Christ's healing into the world through diakonia.

1. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation,* trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 4–5.

A math teacher can live out vocation by helping to teach skills and values to young people, inspiring them to grow into leaders. A police officer can live out vocation by helping to keep the community safe and enabling adults and children to embody healthy community by caring for one another. When people see themselves and the work that they do as part of their baptismal calling, they live out their vocation and diakonia permeates our communities.

So where are we to start in helping the church, the people of God, take seriously our baptismally grounded, diakonia-driven vocation? It starts with taking the first, risky step, on the bridge to a new adventure.

Creator God: building bridges

God is building bridges. These bridges might start in the church or they might start in the world. The people of God are called through their baptismal vocation to walk, skip, or run across these bridges to enter into relationship with one another, serving those who need it most and finding Christ in the stranger.

The church is called to look outside of itself and ponder who is on the other side of the bridge. Who are we here for? Why do we exist? In her writing on diakonia, Stephanie Dietrich draws upon the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to help answer these questions about whom the church is for:

> Bonhoeffer emphasized that the church can only be church in the real sense when it is there for other people. The 'other people' are all those who do not belong to the church as an institutional or doctrinal community of faith, especially those who are counted as 'unbelievers, sinners, outsiders'—all those who are suffering.[2]

Indeed, whatever the station in which we find ourselves, Bonhoeffer's theology insists that we are people of God, who must live in the world and engage the world as Christians. In community we are all bound together by our humanity.[3] Empowered by the font and nourished at the communion table, Christians are sent into the world to share this good news with others through every vocation in which we find ourselves.

Heart River Lutheran Church

Heart River Lutheran Church in Mandan, North Dakota, is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation made up of both people from Bismarck-Mandan and incarcerated youth, who have worshipped together by invitation on the campus of the North Dakota Youth Correctional Center (YCC) for the last thirty years.[4]

The people who come onto campus for worship each week literally cross at least one bridge to get to the campus. The youth who cross the bridge to get there leave behind a past and enter into a new life: life that is structured, accountable, sober, and rehabilitative. On this side of the bridge they can see a future with hope, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your well-

2. Stephanie Dietrich, "'Mercy and Truth are Met Together; Righteousness and Peace Have Kissed Each Other' (Psalm 85:10): Biblical and Systematic Perspectives on Diakonia as Advocacy and Fight for Justice," in Stephanie Dietrich, ed., *Diakonia as Christian Social Practice: An Introduction* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 31–32.

3. Ibid.

4. For more information on this specific ministry, see: www.heartriverlutheran.org or www.heartriverhope.org.

being and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer 29:11).[5] The youth eventually leave YCC, cross the bridge back into the greater community and are faced with the harsh realities of temptation in life outside in the real world. On that side of the bridge, hope might seem a distant memory. Yet, hope is something they cling to desperately as they navigate life on their own.

In 1984 the YCC administration invited a small group of Lutherans to worship regularly on campus. Through this invitation God extended a bridge that has given birth to expressions of diakonia. Over the last thirty years, God has built bridges in and through the relationships made in this small state-owned "prairie church" called Hope Chapel. Approximately sixty Bismarck-Mandan community members cross the bridge to worship with nearly forty incarcerated youth who come voluntarily. We share the peace, share smiles, and assure them we care about them. The youth are invited to share their gifts of leadership through serving as ushers, communion assistants, readers, and by offering special music. For the people of Heart River, it is a holy time to share with young people, who are vulnerable and in a place of deep questioning about their lives. We break bread at one table together; the staff of YCC reach out their hands for the bread of life being given by the youth, whom they lock up each night.

Through this invitation God extended a bridge that has given birth to expressions of diakonia.

Heart River is a church grounded in baptismal vocation. People who come here are committed to serve in their daily lives beyond the chapel. There is no roadside sign or beautiful steeple towering above the trees to draw people in. The people, who intentionally drive past the "no trespassing" signs, come because they feel called to walk alongside the young people who have made their way into corrections. Heart River is a unique congregation, whose mission and purpose sit side by side in the pews each week, clearly identified by their green scrubs. It is impossible to ignore the beautiful call to diakonia after meeting one of these youth.

One member of Heart River feels called to worship and walk with these young people at YCC because she has experienced so much support and love in her own life. She now wants to share that experience with young people who need love and support so desperately. Once, during a game night a youth said to me, "Why would you and all these others come spend your free time here with kids like us instead of being home with your family?" It breaks our hearts. These children of God have yet to believe that they truly are loved and are children of God.

Laura, one of God's children, was sentenced to YCC as a deeply hurt and angry young woman. She honestly said she hated God. While at YCC, she started coming to worship and Bible study. She would ask questions and soon found herself singing in worship and leading in other ways. One day she asked Pastor Renee if she could be

5. "Welfare" is translated as "well-being," due to the stigma attached to the word, welfare, in our context. These words are spoken every Sunday in worship to the young people who are leaving campus for the next step in their journey.

baptized. She comes from the Seventh Day Adventist tradition and wanted baptism by immersion, being fully submersed. After some baptismal classes, and preparation with her and her family, we helped Laura prepare for her special day to be baptized, surprisingly, in the YCC swimming pool! When asked who she wanted to be her baptismal sponsor, she said, "You know that grey-haired lady who always comes to worship?" To which we replied, "You mean June?" June usually sits in the back left of the chapel, while the YCC girls sit in the front right. Why would she pick June? She said it was because of the *sharing of the peace.* Something special happened between Laura and June in a simple smile and the sharing of the peace on Sunday mornings. In those moments Laura felt safe and loved by June.

It is a mutual ministry where we have opened ourselves to be changed and transformed by the relationships God gives us.

So on a beautiful day in September Laura was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We sang "Amazing Grace" by a chlorine-filled, echo-y swimming pool. It was beautiful. Laura and June are still in a mentoring relationship, albeit a long distance one. June sends Laura text messages and words of encouragement. She mails her the weekly sermon from Heart River from time to time. She prays for her through all of her hardships and trials. Through these God-given opportunities, June and Laura are changing one another's lives. This is diakonia lived out in vocation.

The ministry encountered on the bridge is indeed a mutual ministry. It is not just we the church, who are crossing the bridge to help "them." Rather, it is a mutual ministry where we have opened ourselves to be changed and transformed by the relationships God gives us. We trust that in our human connectedness, bonded together, we are able to encounter Christ through our daily vocations.

Diaconal ministry and Heart River

The gift for congregations who extend a call to a rostered diaconal minister is that they call a trained ministry professional, whose responsibility lies in intentionally spurring people into diakonia-rich vocations in daily life. I once heard someone say that diaconal ministers are thorns in the side of the church, uncomfortably reminding the church of its purpose. Diaconal ministry means raising a voice that is not always the one people want to hear. Too often, in the midst of building up the body of Christ, a church might find herself navel gazing or looking inward. A diaconal minister can specifically point outward, empowering the congregation to feel the uncomfortable thorn in her side and to remember her purpose: to serve those in need.

Upon finding her home in Hope Chapel, Heart River Lutheran Church found her purpose: to serve and journey with youth in need. Heart River people believe in taking risks for the sake of relationship. Heart River took seriously their call to support young adults in the juvenile justice system, while they were on campus and upon re-entering community off campus. Especially when youth started

asking whether they could come back to Heart River to worship, the congregation realized that, while the youth could not return, we had a call to address a need by empowering the congregations in the community to better receive these vulnerable young adults. This awareness led Heart River to call a diaconal minister.

Heart River is acutely aware of the graciousness of the invitation to be present on campus, the importance of stewarding well this unique church and state relationship, and the realities of intentionally fostering relationships with youth re-entering the community. My specific call to diaconal ministry in this setting lies in crossing bridges, fostering relationships, being a liaison, and connecting five groups: the people of Heart River Lutheran Church; the youth at YCC; the administration of YCC, and other state agencies; congregations and organizations within communities; and the families of the youth.

I am called to train and equip mentors, who are interested in developing intentional relationships with youth as they leave YCC by their mentoring or through Open Table.[6] These mentors come from Heart River, from other congregations, and from the larger community. I get to invite others into this amazing opportunity to share their unique gifts and skills by being in relationship with those most in need—young people who have struggles with addiction, abuse, and mental health. We teach and train people to become mentors and advocates for youth in the justice system. We uplift God's transformative work in and through relationships.

As a diaconal minister, I am called to preach God's Word and give presentations in the community, advocating for young people in the justice system. I am given the task of helping people understand who these complex creatures are, and how we might work together to care for these teenagers before and after they have been incarcerated. I am also called to name and uplift the realities of those who are marginalized, including the youth I work with, honestly naming these realities: homelessness, substance abuse, mental health disorders, and a culture that corrupts by glamorizing substance abuse and shuns those on the margins.

The future of diaconal ministry is strengthened by diaconal ministers, because we are able intentionally to bring the cries of the world into the church, and at the same time take the word and people of God out of the church and into the world to act as God's hands, feet, and ears. Much like the earliest diaconate workers, we are called to focus on the specialized work of raising awareness and advocating for the poor, those in need, and the oppressed by addressing social justice issues. The ability to do this comes from knowing the specific community, educating oneself about the particular needs of those on the margins, and finding ways to partner with the church and local organizations to respond to those needs effectively.

One of the reasons I understand diakonia and vocation as synonymous is because a large part of my call as a diaconal minister revolves around these two themes. One aspect of my call is to listen to people's stories. I am called to help adult volunteers and congregation members to think about their vocations in ways that assist them to use their gifts and skills to serve others, especially the young people who have been in the justice system. Many of the people I meet have a deep compassion for young people. They simply need to be asked to help out. Perhaps that is by offering a listening ear,

6. See www.theopentable.org for more information on this amazing wrap-around ministry for people on the margins.

because they are retired and have the time. One volunteer works on cars as a hobby; I asked if he might be willing to teach a young man how to change oil in a car. It might mean identifying someone who can lend a ride, so a youth can get a driver's license. Or it can involve finding someone to be a mentor who sits with a youth in church in the communities to which they are returning. One volunteer does not like to play games, but she offered to teach piano lessons to any of the youth who would like them. By listening to people's stories, I am given the opportunity to find adults and youth, who might work very well together, and empower them to be in relationship. Diaconal ministers are called to do this in any setting where they are called—nudging and equipping the baptized to use their gifts for diakonia in the world.

Another aspect of my call is to get to know the youth. I have the blessed opportunity to ponder and dream with them about what a future with hope looks like. I get to remind them that they are beloved children of God and that their identity in Christ is much more powerful than anything on their records. I am called to remind them that there are people in congregations in communities, much like Heart River, who care deeply for them and want a future with hope for them. I get to help them understand that their vocation as sibling, as student, and as a sober individual really matters. We hope they see their gifts in ways that allow them to realize that their lives have meaning. For instance, many youth hope to go to school to study criminal justice, so they can help youth who are just like themselves. They want the opportunity to make a difference. One of the young people wanted to give back to the community and joined us as our congregation served at a local soup supper. For many youth, they simply need to be asked and invited.

Diakonia is hard work

Why is it so hard for us to enter into relationship with the "least of these" (Matt 25:40)? We know that Christ is there; Christ is in these beautiful children of God. When the wrath of drug abuse and mental health issues takes over a person, fear stops us in our tracks.

Most people have a considerable amount of fear when asked to break out of the comfort of their own personal bubbles and to engage the world in meaningful (but incredibly hard) ways. There is fear about entering into people's lives, which are so broken and hurt. We do not always understand mental health issues, gangs, drugs, suicide, abuse, and death. For many, it is surprising and heart-breaking to learn of the horrible things a 15-year-old has already had to face in their life. We fear the criminal mind, being taken advantage of, lied to, or cheated. We fear making ourselves vulnerable. We fear the unknown; we fear trusting each other, especially in a mentoring relationship. We fear being let down, if the youth are unable to make the changes they need for healing in their lives. We fear not being appreciated. We fear failure. Sometimes we think that we are supposed to "fix" people or situations, and accepting that this is not our job is a hard task. Our young people fear a punishing, judgmental God. Their fear about trusting others inhibits them from allowing a loving, Creator God to love them. They fear letting anyone love them. Fear can permeate the ministry to which we are called and prevent us from trusting God's call to diakonia.

Despite all of these fears and all of the brokenness, God promises that we are made new in Christ. We are called by God to cling to the baptismal promise: "from now on, therefore, we regard no one from

a human point of view, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: see everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:16–17). These are God's promises, not only for me, but for those on the margins. Sometimes the "newness" has yet to be seen in the lives of the people we care about, particularly those who are struggling. Often diakonia is about planting seeds and trusting God's work in the midst of the dark and sometimes painful, invisible growing period.

The church must make an effort to discern itself as more than a social club.

Sister Kathleen Atkinson, a deeply wise Benedictine Sister who does re-entry ministry with incarcerated adults and works with those on the margins, once told me, "If you believe in the power of the resurrection, then you can believe in the power of transformation for someone in corrections." I encourage you to go to your local soup kitchen or to the emergency homeless shelter. Strike up a conversation, listen, and think about her words. I pray they move you as they move me.

Conclusion

The church must make an effort to discern itself as more than a social club. The church needs to claim and proclaim God's sustaining and life-giving Word through diakonia within and beyond the congregation. Being washed and fed in church prepares us to be the relevant and engaging body of Christ in the world.

Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer remind us that we are bound to one another by our humanity. Another servant, Mother Teresa, said: "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." When we realize that we belong to one another, we begin to listen to one another and try to understand one another. We bear the cross of Christ with compassion and love for people who are not like us. Thereby we are forever changed. We are forever changed because the death-inducing waters of baptism raise us to new life, life lived as a God-given, diakonia-rich vocation.

For reflection and discussion:

Why are you here? If your church were to disappear from the street next week, what would people say they missed? How is your congregation discerning its identity as more than social club? What is your mission as a congregation?

How does your congregation in its particular context and community discern your unique call to diakonia? What are the gifts in your local community? Where do your gifts and vocations meet the community's greatest needs?

What bridges between your congregation and community is God calling you to cross?

What prevents you from pursuing a diakonia-rich vocation? What are your fears?

When the pastor says "Go in peace. Serve the Lord!" at the end of worship, what does this mean for you personally?

A Prophetic Voice for Love, Justice, and Service: The Lay Diaconate Embodied by United Methodist Deaconesses and Home Missioners

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Introduction

The ministry of the diaconate within United Methodism and its predecessor churches has taken many forms. The pioneers of diakonia, or servant ministries, were deaconesses—lay women consecrated for vocational ministries in the world. In the 127 years since the Office of Deaconess was first established in the Methodist Episcopal Church, North American Methodism has seen diakonia embodied in a variety of ministerial forms and designations. While other diaconal offices have closed, the lay Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner thrives today along with the clergy Order of Deacons.

Deaconesses and home missioners are clear in their call to a lifetime relationship and ministry as laity. This has been crucial, for identification and location as laity enables many deaconesses and home missioners in their ministries, which are oftentimes on the cutting-edge of what it means to represent the church in the world. Though the number of lay ministries is actively growing, the deaconess and home missioner relationship is the only one currently recognized by The United Methodist Church as part of diakonia. It is the only full-time vocational option available to women and men called to lay diaconal ministries in the United Methodist Church.

Deaconesses and home missioners are clear in their call to a lifetime relationship and ministry as laity.

The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner has put forth a vision for the future of our movement: to be a prophetic voice for love, justice, and service so that all may experience abundant life. This vision, part of our strategic plan titled "Living the Vision," is shaped by our interpretation of Scripture, our theological understand-

For deaconesses and home missioners, our relationship to the church as laity is a significant and valuable embodiment of diakonia.

ing of what it means to embody the lay diaconate, our North American Methodist history and Wesleyan heritage, as well as our individual and communal experiences of being engaged in servant ministry. This article begins by exploring the significance of a lay diaconate and a brief historical sketch of how the Office came to be. These provide backdrop for understanding how the deaconess and home missioner community have come to envision the future and embody the lay diaconate in United Methodism. We also share the results of a strategic planning process that helped us to prayerfully consider the needs of God's people and how we as a community within The United Methodist Church are being called to respond.

Significance of a lay diaconate

Within United Methodism, there are currently two recognized paths for diaconal ministry: the lay order Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner and the clergy Order of Deacons. For deaconesses and home missioners, our relationship to the church as laity is a significant and valuable embodiment of diakonia. We acknowledge and affirm the ministries of our deacon brothers and sisters, with the recognition that not all who are called to diaconal ministry are called to ordination. In The United Methodist Church, deacons are ordained to Word, Compassion, Justice and Service and are called to connect the church and the world. Deaconesses and home missioners are consecrated and commissioned to ministries of Love, Justice, and Service and are called to represent the church in the world. Having more than one path to diaconal ministry is what enables deaconesses, home missioners, and deacons to do the many and various ministries to which we are called. It has created a rich and diverse range of diaconal ministry in United Methodism.

To understand the significance of the lay diaconate, it is important to establish a definition of *laity*. The term "laity" and its root "lay" are derived from the Greek *laos*, which is used in 1 Pet 2:9 to mean the "people" of God: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light."[1] As people of God, *laos* comprise the priesthood of all believers, a construct introduced in the letter to the Hebrews and later reclaimed by Martin Luther at the dawn of the Reformation.[2] A form of this doctrine exists in present-day Methodism and is the basis of Part IV in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church,* titled "The Ministry of All Christians." In addition to this biblical understanding, United Methodists connect lay identity and call to ministry to

1. Common English Bible translation.
2. Mark A. Maddix, "A Biblical Model of the People of God: Overcoming the Clergy/Laity Dichotomy," in *Christian Education Journal 6* (September 2009): 218–219.

> We are God's people, baptized in Christ, and called to a life of discipleship and servant ministry.

the sacrament of baptism: "All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment."[3]

The biblical witness of the New Testament and our Methodist understanding of the ministry of all Christians form the basis of our understanding of laity. We are God's people, baptized in Christ, and called to a life of discipleship and servant ministry. As *The Book of Discipline* states: "Lay members of The United Methodist Church are, by history and calling, active advocates of the gospel of Jesus Christ."[4] Deaconess and home missioner identity stems from this definition of laity and a call to lifetime relationship under the authority of the church in a full-time vocation of ministry.

It is important to note that this understanding of laity is stated in independent terms and does not rely upon a definition of clergy. It is a common tendency to define laity in relation to clergy, as though they are on opposite ends of a spectrum. In secular contexts a layperson is contrasted with a professional or expert, connoting an amateur or unskilled person. When laity is placed in a dichotomy with clergy, it establishes two classes of Christian leaders and adds a layer of difficulty to ecclesial organization which is not helpful and sometimes hurtful.[5] This dichotomy is perpetuated by many constructs, including but not limited to the professionalization of clergy.[6] Since deaconesses and home missioners are also professionals in their areas of ministries, it is essential to develop an understanding of laity outside of the clergy/laity dichotomy.

History and polity of the Methodist Deaconess Movement

The Book of Discipline, our denomination's primary church polity document, has mandated the Office of Deaconess since the 1888 Methodist Episcopal Church edition. Deaconesses were charged to "minister to the poor, visit the sick, pray with the dying, care for the orphan, seek the wandering, comfort the sorrowing, save the sinning, and, relinquishing wholly all other pursuits, devote themselves, in a general way, to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to their abilities."[7] When the Office of Deaconess was established in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1902, her duties had expanded to include "any religious or teaching work to which she may be assigned by the preacher in charge, employing her in the home or foreign field."[8] From the beginnings of the movement, deaconesses were identified as being called to ministries that took them

3. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 95.

4. Ibid.

5. Maddix, 214, 221.

6. Ibid., 221.

7. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1888* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1888), 126.

8. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1902* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1902), 171.

to the edges of society to be the church in the world. While this list of ministry tasks may seem very specific, there is some freedom and space for deaconesses to employ themselves in general ministry activities that are suited to their abilities. This forward-thinking language helped the deaconess movement to grow and gain momentum in a rapidly changing industrial world.

Deaconesses were identified as being called to ministries that took them to the edges of society to be the church in the world.

When the three branches of Methodism merged to form the Methodist Church in 1939, all language of charge had disappeared from the *Discipline.* It was not until 1976 that the purpose of deaconesses and home missionaries found its way back into the *Discipline.* As a result of the 1972-1976 Special Committee on Study of the Diaconate and the creation of diaconal ministers, the paragraphs on deaconesses and home missionaries were rewritten to include a clear statement of purpose and description of call.[9]

The current provision for the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is found in ¶1314 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012*. It states:

> The purpose of the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner shall be to express representatively the love and concern of the believing community for the needs in the world and to enable, through education and involvement, the full ministry and mission of the people of God. Deaconesses and home missioners function through diverse forms of service directed toward the world to make Jesus Christ known in the fullness of his ministry and mission, which mandate that his followers:
>
> a) Alleviate suffering;
>
> b) Eradicate causes of injustice and all that robs life of dignity and worth;
>
> c) Facilitate the development of full human potential; and
>
> d) Share in building global community through the church universal.[10]

This statement of purpose captures much of the purpose and passion that developed in the deaconess movement since 1888. It portrays deaconesses and home missioners as the link between our churches and the world, engaging in diverse ministries that enable all God's people in mission and ministry. The four mandates of Christ are of particular note, in contrast to *Disciplines* prior to 1976. This is the first time in the history of the movement that the purpose of deaconesses (and home missioners) is theologically justified within church polity. Whereas the movement had always identified itself with Phoebe and the early church establishment of diakonia, the revisions in 1976 took the connections directly to Jesus Christ and his call to discipleship,

9. Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1997), 256–259; *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1976* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1976), 446–447.

10. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012*, 623.

ministry, and mission.

Today's Deaconess and Home Missioner Community

United Methodist deaconesses and home missioners have gleaned from their official statement of purpose three words to describe our call to ministry: love, justice, and service. We have used these as key terms to describe the foundation of our full-time vocational calling. This language is woven into the consecration service liturgy for deaconesses and home missioners: "The call of God is always profound, and our response can be no less extraordinary. In the varied ministries of love, justice and service to which the Holy Spirit is leading you, you will testify to the infinite love of God in Christ Jesus."[11]

In living out the call "to express representatively the love and concern of the believing community for the needs in the world,"[12] deaconesses and home missioners are expressing God's love in the world. This is grounded in 1 John 4:16b: "God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them."[13] God uniquely loves and gifts each person, calling us to the same level of loving relationship and commitment with one another. In the wide variety of ministries in which we are called and in all that we do, deaconesses and home missioners represent God's love felt within our individual selves, within our covenant community, and in what is known as the community of believers that is the church universal.

11. From the liturgy of the Deaconess and Home Missioner Consecration and Commissioning Service.

12. Ibid.

13. Common English Bible translation.

God uniquely loves and gifts each person, calling us to the same level of loving relationship and commitment with one another.

Ministries of justice have long been present within the deaconess movement. John Wesley preached "that the world is our parish" and therefore, as United Methodists, this translates into a support of justice and mission work globally. The professional training and coursework required for deaconess/home missioner preparation emphasizes the Wesleyan-based understanding that evangelism and social action are inseparable. Deaconesses and home missioners witness to and address the immediate concerns of individuals and the systemic issues/root causes of injustice, so that justice may be realized and all may experience abundant life.

The heart of the deaconess or home missioner is that of a servant. This is illustrated in our motto, "I serve neither for reward nor recognition but from gratitude and love; my reward is that I may serve." Service is often defined as an intangible product, though, for deaconesses and home missioners, it is very real. It is how we express what is felt spiritually within us and is an external witness of and response to God's love. Deaconesses and home missioners are able to serve wherever called, whether or not the ministry is directly connected to a church body, as long as the required approvals are given. The ability

to serve wherever one is called reflects one of the layered meanings of the deaconess and home missioner emblem. The cross with all arms of equal length represents the spread of Christianity in all four directions—North, South, East, and West. We believe that there is no limit as to where God may call us to service, and we serve with full inclusiveness representative of God's love.

It is the shared love, commitment to justice, and call to service that knits us into community. Together, deaconesses and home missioners form a covenant community providing support, mutual accountability, and care for one another, while we all strive to fulfill the calling we have received to lay diaconate ministry. A covenant community is a group of individuals who bind themselves to each other and to the group by a solemn agreement or covenant. Deaconesses and home missioners publically commit to this covenant community relationship and to the greater world diaconate community during their consecration, thereby forming a sustaining and nurturing connection.

It is the shared love, commitment to justice, and call to service that knits us into community.

Our community members are representative of the full diversity of the membership of The United Methodist Church. As a community based upon a shared faith commitment and calling, there is a level of trust and safety in space to learn and grow, both as individuals and as a group. The web of diverse relations we share nurtures and deepens our call to lifetime servant ministry and enriches the community and its collective ministry. This strong sense of community undergirds, empowers, and supports deaconesses and home missioners in our ministry. It calls us into accountability, affords us opportunities to struggle together to find answers to critical problems, and supports us in our personal and professional challenges.

From 2008 to 2012, the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner engaged in a visioning and strategic planning process. It was a particularly important process for our community as we were in a period of growth following a time of questioning and uncertainty. For the deaconess and home missioner community, strategic planning was a process whereby we prayerfully considered the needs of God's people and how we as a community are being called to respond. We wanted to be smart about how we grow and develop our community and how we use our resources for the greatest good.

The decision to engage in a strategic planning process at this point in the life of the deaconess movement rested on five premises. First, the community had to be ready for the process. We were led by someone gifted in this type of organizational work, ready to thrive and to live fully as a community, and ready to organize in planning for the future of the movement. Second, the community had to be confident in its identity. This was very important, because we are a community that defines and claims our purpose and vision together. Third, we needed to be fully aware of our circumstances. Our clarity of purpose would need to develop out of a comprehensive perspective that included a realistic view of our situation, resources, church structure, societal structure, and challenges. Fourth, visioning

would require discipline to set priorities and follow the steps of the process. Fifth, our community would have to be committed to the plan and stay on task.

The Strategic Planning Steering Team engaged key stakeholders and repeatedly solicited feedback from the entire deaconess and home missioner community. Out of these discussions, the plan evolved into purpose, vision, value, and outcome statements. This Spirit-led process reflected the professional standards of the current knowledge of the human resource industry and principles of organizational development. It was a process of listening and understanding the uniqueness of the deaconess and home missioner community, our organization's service offerings, structure, leadership style, and actual/desired culture.

A vision is relevant when it is nurtured and able to grow as the community develops and lives into it.

Our vision statement reads: "The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner of The United Methodist Church is a prophetic voice for love, justice, and service so that all may experience abundant life." A vision is relevant when it is nurtured and able to grow as the community develops and lives into it. In every activity of administration, the vision, value, and outcome statements of our strategic plan serve as the lens through which all activities are viewed. We find it important to be in the present with God guiding our actions as to what we are to be doing in service and as to how we expand the availability of this lay diaconate opportunity for ministry to all who are called. We are seeking new ways to educate United Methodists about the importance and value of deaconess and home missioner ministries. This is part of a conscious effort to raise awareness and understanding of the lay diaconate movement as represented by the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner, and move past the history of inequitable and diminishing treatment that lay women in particular have suffered from the church's institutional structures.

Moving forward and living the vision

The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is a lay diaconal movement of the present with forward-thinking vision. In the present our history informs us, Scripture roots us, and the mission that God has called us to as a lay diaconal order drives us. Our outreach is global as our ministries have no boundaries for where we may be called; our scope is ecumenical as we serve in solidarity with the diaconate across the church universal and within diverse communities. The strategic planning process provided our community with continued development of focus, understanding, and purpose.

It is in the outcome statements of the strategic plan that we come to understand how our vision may be lived out by the deaconess and home missioner community. These six statements reflect our calling as a community and as individuals engaged in lifetime servant ministries. They guide us and inspire us as we engage in God's work in the world.

- Deaconesses and home missioners experience a strong sense of supportive and connectional Community.
- The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is vibrant, diverse, and

growing.

- Deaconesses and home missioners expand the church's impact in the world by engaging in diverse cutting edge ministries and in training the laity for mission.
- The Deaconess and Home Missioner ministry is strengthened and expanded through strong global relationships within the ecumenical diaconate and Pan-Methodist connections.
- Deaconesses and home missioners engage in spiritual growth and self-care for themselves and as an example for others.
- The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner has the resources and administrative capacity to support their purpose.

Our strategic plan is titled, "Living the Vision," because we understand that a vision has meaning when it is being lived out. By aspiring to these outcome statements, we are living out our vision to be a prophetic voice for love, justice, and service.

Our diaconal call continues to be clarified and strengthened as laity in fulltime vocational ministries of love, justice, and service, representing Christ's presence among those whom we serve. In fulfilling our call under the authority of the church, we witness daily in our servant ministries to the mandates of Christ as affirmed by *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church.* Our strategic plan supports the governance for the deaconess and home missioner community and builds upon it by guiding how we actively live out the mandates today and into the future. Deaconess and home missioner ministries continue to evolve as the needs of the world evolve, though the call to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ remains constant.[14]

For reflection and discussion:

It is our premise that laity and clergy are both professionals and that defining laity in terms of the clergy creates a class system within our ecclesiastical structures. How do we move from hierarchical classifications (professional vs. non-professional) to classifications that affirm and enable all ministry callings?

We emphasize the significance of covenant community in our functioning as the lay diaconate of The United Methodist Church. How do you see community undergirding and guiding the future of the diaconate movement?

The professional training and coursework required for deaconess/home missioner preparation emphasizes the Wesleyan-based understanding that evangelism and social action are inseparable. What do you envision as the training/equipping needs for the future?

The United Methodist deaconess and home missioner movement answers the call to serve on the edges and in the borderlands between church and society. Where do you see the cutting edge of ministry leading or developing in the future of the diaconate movement?

United Methodist deaconesses and home missioners serve with full inclusiveness representative of God's love. What does it mean to be fully inclusive today and how might that change within the next ten years?

14. This article is an adaptation of "Living the Vision: How United Methodist Deaconesses and Home Missioners Understand and Embody the Lay Diaconate," prepared for the Study of Lay Order in Relationship with the Deaconess/Home Missioner Movement in The United Methodist Church and presented at the Lay Order Conference, September 26–28, 2014.

A Deacon's Eye for Healing Congregations

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This is a time of ecumenical rediscovery for the diaconate. The Word and Service Task Force of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), preparing for a proposed unified Word and Service roster,[1] offers the following definition under the single title "Deacon":

> Deacons provide a ministry of Word and Service, exemplifying the life of Christ-like service to all persons and creation: nurturing, healing, leading, advocating dignity and justice, and equipping the whole people of God for their life of witness and service within and beyond the congregation for the sake of God's mission in the world.[2]

This definition offers a special emphasis on justice and healing. In The United Methodist Church (UMC), deacons are ordained to a lifetime ministry of Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice.[3]

As Lutherans and United Methodists continue to live into a full communion agreement, including mutual recognition of ministries, an important aspect of this recognition is the task of understanding and interpreting the service of the deacon.

Many other members of the body of Christ also participate in ministries of word, service, compassion, and justice. What distinguishes the deacon, however, is an identity fully shaped by these gifts, combined with a calling from God and an affirmation by the church.[4] As a called, set-apart, and ordained deacon, I have a distinctive perspective on ministry: a deacon's eye for compassion and justice. The apostle Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. …If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of

1. http://www.elca.org/en/Living-Lutheran/Seeds/2014/07/140725-A-unified-word-and-service-roster?_ga=1.173983651.1268984575.1412122259

2. The ELCA Word and Service Task Force "suggests that Deacon be used as the working title for the new roster." Word and Service Task Force Update, July 15, 2013. ELCA. http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Word_And_Service_Task_Force_Update_February.pdf?_ga=1.208054418.1268984575.1412122259

3. In 1996 the UMC established a permanent order of deacons, ordained to Word and Service. In 2012 the UMC expanded this description to include Compassion and Justice.

4. In her recent book on the diaconate, Margaret Ann Crain suggests that what distinguishes the ministry of a deacon is not so much our function but our identity. Margaret Ann Crain, *The United Methodist Deacon: Ordained to Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 11.

it" (1 Cor 12:12 and 12:26-27). Each deacon is a member of the body of Christ with unique gifts, rejoicing and suffering along with the other members. Furthermore, each and every congregation is one manifestation of our incarnate Savior who suffered, died, was buried, and rose again. Before we jump too quickly to Christ's resurrection, however, Paul's words to the congregation in Corinth remind us that the body of Christ can suffer even now. We are the body of Christ, wounded and wounding, at times betrayed by one of our own members.

It is with a deacon's eye that I view the congregation, the body of Christ, wounded and wounding. It is with a deacon's eye that I see compassion and justice as salves for these wounds. It is with a deacon's eye that I see the need for healing congregations. Indeed, healing is a central part of diaconal identity, as illustrated by the title of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) report of its Johannesburg consultation in 2002, *Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World.*[5] It is through a deacon's eye that the church can learn to identify, name, and address the wounds of violation due to sexual abuse in ministry. Moreover, it is through healing congregations that the body of Christ can offer grace in a world of violence and abuse.

Sexual abuse in ministry

One of the most devastating wounds to the body of Christ today is sexual abuse in ministry. This occurs when a person in a position of ministerial leadership, lay or ordained, violates the sacred trust of that office by inappropriately crossing sexual boundaries. Sexual abuse by individuals

Each deacon is a member of the body of Christ with unique gifts, rejoicing and suffering along with the other members.

in ministerial leadership is an abuse of the power. When a church leader engages in sexual behavior with someone, whom they should be serving in ministry, that leader is no longer serving the best interests of the other person but instead using that person and the position of ministerial leadership to gratify his or her own desires. When a ministerial relationship becomes sexualized, it ceases to be a ministry of the church, and the aftereffects can be devastating not only to the exploited congregant but to the entire congregation.[6]

Unfortunately, ministerial sexual abuse is not as rare as we might suppose. Diana Garland, Dean of the Baylor University School of Social Work, surveyed thousands of women who had attended church at least once in the preceding month. She found that 1 in 33 women reported having been sexually harassed or abused by her own pastor during her adult life.[7] The UMC handles between

5. www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/ EN/Consultation_Diakonia-2002.pdf

6. See the special issue, "Violating Boundaries: Improprieties in Ministry," of *Caring Connections: An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 10 (Spring 2013).

7. Diana R. Garland, "The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults: A Research Study Executive Summary." http://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/index.php?id=67406 (April 20, 2015).

150-500 credible allegations of clergy sexual abuse every year in the United States according to recent research.[8] From my own experience as a clergy boundaries trainer, I estimate 12 percent of United Methodist congregations in the United States, nearly 4,000 congregations, are suffering from the aftereffects of sexual abuse by a ministerial leader.[9] This is a problem that affects us all.

A wounded congregation

The following is a fictionalized illustration of a wounded congregation, based on events from actual cases.[10] The church secretary, in her mid-40s and also a church member, had filed a complaint against the senior pastor, alleging that he had coerced her into a sexual relationship, violating the sacred trust of ministry. She admitted that at first she thought the relationship was based on genuine and mutual love. It had felt like God intended her to be with this man and that she could imagine a wonderful future with him. He admonished her to keep it their secret, explaining how others in the congregation would not understand and that they should wait to tell people when the time was right. Their sexual intimacy went on for nearly a year before she became so uncomfortable with the secrecy that she demanded they make their relationship public. He tried to convince her to keep quiet, saying this was God's plan for their lives. But she told him she could not stay quiet any longer. He then broke things off with her and asked her to resign her position at the church. As a single mother with no other source of income, she did not want to quit her job.

She sought help from a victim advocate, discovered the definition of clergy sexual misconduct, and learned to name his behavior as abuse. It was at this point that she began to realize the extent of his manipulation and coercion, filing a complaint with the bishop alleging sexual misconduct. Meanwhile, she was afraid of losing her job. In fact, the congregation's personnel committee, on a directive from the pastor, gave her two weeks' notice, even as she told them about the pastor's abusive behavior and her complaint to the bishop. When she tried to contest her firing to the bishop, she received an official letter from the conference's lawyer stating that personnel matters were up to the local congregation to decide, not the bishop.

She left her job, her congregation, and her pastor. The bishop dismissed her complaint as lacking sufficient evidence. The pastor continued in his appointment and members of the congregation became divided over who and what to believe. As she began sharing the real reason for her departure with members of the congregation, she was met with a range of responses: from skepticism and denial to righteous indignation at the pastor and compassion for her circumstance. Some members grew in distrust and suspicion of the pastor and others grew in their unfaltering support for

8. Sally Badgley Dolch, *Healing the Breach: Response Team Intervention in United Methodist Congregations.* Doctor of Ministry Thesis. Wesley Theological Seminary, 2010.

9. In 2009 I conducted a survey among over 600 clergy in the Northern Illinois Conference of the UMC, during a required healthy boundaries training workshop. We found that about 50 percent of those present had served a congregation, in which sexual misconduct by a ministerial leader had occurred in its past. This data is consistent with surveys by boundaries trainers of UMC clergy around the United States.

10. This illustration is based on an amalgam of actual cases. All names and identifying details have been altered to provide anonymity.

his ministerial leadership. The personnel committee, who this time interviewed only male candidates for the job, told the next church secretary nothing about these circumstances and the growing conflicts in the congregation.

This story of abuse by a ministerial leader illustrates the damaging and lingering effects of that behavior on a congregation.

Congregational trauma and dysfunction

A congregation wounded by its own trusted leader suffers a type of trauma distinct from other traumas in the faith community: the perpetrator is in a position representing God. The very resources that a church typically draws upon—its pastoral leadership, judicatory personnel, and integrity as a community of faith—are thrown into disarray and distrust, hampering recovery. Every ministerial leader becomes tainted by distrust, stemming from one minister's offense.

In a wounded congregation, laypeople often take sides over what really happened and who is to blame for the alleged sexual abuse. Furthermore, when the victim is an adult, congregations are often divided because many people find it difficult to understand how an adult can be a victim, lacking the ability to offer genuine consent to the sexual advances of his/her pastor. Often victims are blamed and perpetrators are not held accountable. Even when the abuse is acknowledged, many judicatory personnel mistakenly believe that simply getting rid of the perpetrator (and often also the victim) will solve the problem. However, when a traumatized congregation is not assisted in healing, it remains mired in unhealthy patterns long after the initial breach of trust. This type of wound does not go away on its own.

When a traumatized congregation is not assisted in healing, it remains mired in unhealthy patterns long after the initial breach of trust.

Conflicts over leadership can become part of the congregational system, inhibiting the leadership of the incoming pastor, who follows a pastor whose departure was clouded by suspected or confirmed misconduct. Recently, I heard from a judicatory leader who is working with a congregation that is trying to come to terms with the departure of their pastor because of sexual misconduct that occurred over ten years ago, which was never handled publicly. The initial call for help was about deepening conflict over pastoral leadership—a sure path to congregational decline.[11] This congregation's unhealed wounds continue to hamper its ministry a decade after the incident. The wounded body of Christ needs healing.

11. According to the Faith Community Today FACTs on Growth 2010 Report, "serious conflict is a very strong predictor of congregational decline" and conflict over pastoral leadership is the conflict type "most strongly associated with decline." http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/FACTs%20on%20Growth%202010.pdf

Healing through justice and compassion

To recover vitality, a wounded congregation needs an intentional process of healing, in order to grieve in healthy ways and to reconcile the violation of sacred trust committed by a ministerial leader in relation to the community's historical narrative and self-understanding as a church. The congregation must be able to come to terms with what happened and move forward in faith. A past that is not fully acknowledged has lasting and binding power over the present, which hampers our ability to imagine a better future. Healing within a congregation allows members and leaders to become co-owners of a common story, bad and good, and no longer stuck in the present. We must find ways to re-tell our congregational narratives to open us to the vast possibilities of God's future, so that we are neither continually reacting to a traumatic past nor obsessed with nostalgia for a previous era. With a deacon's eye, I see a way to that future through specific practices of justice and compassion. I mention here only a few of the seven elements of justice-making named by Marie Fortune, the founder of the FaithTrust Institute: truth-telling, acknowledging the violation, and compassion for victims.[12]

The congregation must be able to come to terms with what happened and move forward in faith.

Healing begins with truth-telling, and, indeed, truth-telling is one of the primary gifts of the diaconate.[13] One of the challenges associated with sexual abuse in ministry is that the church must tell the truth to and about itself. Breaking the silence surrounding an incident of sexual abuse by a ministerial leader is the only way to give voice to what really happened and to re-empower the survivor/victim, both for individuals and the congregation itself. Sexual misconduct begins as a secret, with all the appeal, allure, and danger that secrets harbor. When a survivor/victim is empowered to speak the truth about what happened, to name the abuse and to identify it as a violation, then the secret is dispelled and a healing process can begin. A wounded congregation must be similarly empowered to name past abuse and acknowledge the wound in need of healing. This is as important for the community of faith as for the primary survivor/victim.

A recent example of truth-telling in community took place at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, which held a special service to acknowledge and apologize to the victims of John Howard Yoder on March 22, 2015. Some of the women who had been sexually violated by Yoder were able to tell their stories publically for the first time. What is so remarkable is that the institution finally,

12. Marie M. Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred? The Story of a Pastor, the Women He Sexually Abused, and the Congregation He Nearly Destroyed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 114–115.

13. "To Love and Serve the Lord: Diakonia in the Life of the Church," *The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican–Lutheran International Commission* (ALIC III), 2013, 17. http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Transitivity%20ALIC_report-EN%20for%20ACC.pdf?_ga=1.138265648.1268984575.1412122259

decades after the fact, acknowledged Yoder's abuse of over 100 women and offered an apology to them. The current seminary president, Sara Wenger Shenk, confessed: "What was done to you… was grievously wrong. …It should never have been allowed to happen. We failed you. We failed the church. We failed the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[14]

Shenk's apology illustrates Fortune's second element of justice-making: acknowledging the violation. The congregation mentioned above, still mired in conflict over an incident of sexual misconduct from years ago, needs the salve of truth-telling to acknowledge the violation, in order to begin healing from this wound of betrayal. As Fortune explains, "Simple though it is, verbal acknowledgement conveys a depth of understanding and compassion that cannot be accomplished in any other way."[15] Often this requires the assistance of judicatory leaders, who are unafraid to acknowledge the reality of sexual abuse in the church. Healing requires that the institutional church and its judicatory structures be forthright about specific violations and acknowledge the harm done.

Fortune's third element of justice-making is compassion. It takes bold leadership to reestablish ministerial trust where it has been violated. In the best cases, a trained Response/Intervention/Care Team can facilitate a congregational disclosure meeting in partnership with the bishop and other judicatory personnel. Such a Response Team, composed of individuals with specific skills and expertise in handling sexual trauma, can help members of a congregation work through their reactions, feelings, and responses to the news of sexual misconduct by one of their pastoral leaders.[16] A Response Team member may also be assigned to accompany the alleged victim through the process of adjudication. These ministries of listening and being present with those suffering in the body of Christ are courageous acts of compassion, in which many deacons already participate.

Justice and compassion in response to sexual violence are vital practices for mission in a hurting world.

Justice and compassion in response to sexual violence are vital practices for mission in a hurting world. Not a week goes by that I do not read a news headline about some form of sexual assault or violation by individuals with power—church leaders, professional athletes, political leaders, entertainment celebrities, or military personnel—in institutions unwilling or unable to address these offenses with compassion and justice. The *New York Times* recently reported credible allegations from multiple women of sexual harassment by a professor at the Yale School of Medicine. The report describes

14. Michelle Sokol, "Mennonite Seminary Apologizes to Victims of Famed Theologian John Howard Yoder," *National Catholic Reporter,* April 9, 2015. http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/mennonite-seminary-apologizes-victims-famed-theologian-john-howard-yoder

15. Fortune, 115.

16. See "Response Team Ministry for Sexual Misconduct," in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 131–134.

a pattern of sexually harassing behaviors and complaints over a period of decades, during which the school failed to offer compassion and justice.[17] This school and many other institutions in our society are in need of a model for compassion and justice, a way toward healing.

Healing congregations

It is through a deacon's eye for compassion and justice that we can identify, name, and attend to the church's need for healing, so that it can again bear witness to the good news of Christ Jesus. The work of healing congregations is transformative. When a wounded congregation becomes a healing congregation, the wounded body of Christ becomes an agent of grace in the world. The church's authenticity in tending to its own woundedness is essential to being a credible and reliable witness to the gospel in a world, in which domestic violence, sexual abuse, and violence against women and children continue to be the existential reality for millions of individuals. The ministry of healing is a moral imperative for the body of Christ, wounding and wounded. "…Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."[18]

17. Tamar Lewin, "Seven Allege Harassment by Yale Doctor at Clinic," *New York Times*, April 13, 2015.

18. This article is based on a presentation made by the author to the Deacon Dialogue 2015 at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary on April 17, 2015.

When a wounded congregation becomes a healing congregation, the wounded body of Christ becomes an agent of grace in the world.

For reflection and discussion:

As you listen to the news this week, view current events with a deacon's eye for compassion and justice: Where is there need for healing in this broken world?

Take time to pray and meditate on the meaning of Christ crucified and the image of the body of Christ, wounded and wounding, listening for grace and the work of the Holy Spirit in your life: What do you hear God calling you to do?

Have you ever known about or been part of a congregation wounded by its ministerial leader? How was healing hampered? Who proved to be an agent of grace?

Think of a time in your life when someone you trusted wounded your soul. Where did you experience healing? Were you able to find healing in the church?

"Healing congregations" has a double meaning, in which the church could either be receiving healing or bestowing healing. How does this dual meaning point to the surprising work of the Holy Spirit, offering possibilities of grace and transformation in our lives?

Diakonia between Church and Society: Learning from German Experiences and Challenges

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The development of diaconic[1] work in Germany: not a church (hi)story

In Germany like elsewhere, Christians were always active in "love of their neighbors" through individual action. However, in the middle of the nineteenth century, some German Christians became so desperate about the horrible living conditions of the working poor that they started to organize diaconic work in a more professional and institutional way. For example, Theodor Fliedner, a Protestant pastor, founded the first deaconess motherhouse in Kaiserswerth near Duesseldorf in 1836, taking care of sick people and children. Johann Hinrich Wichern, a Lutheran pastor, started his work with socially deprived young boys in the Rauhe Haus in Hamburg in 1833. He trained the first deacons to work with the boys. In many other places the social services of active Christians were founded and worked as "free associations" for the improvement of the social conditions of the poor. These activities were neither activities by the church nor through the church. In a famous speech in 1848, Wichern tried to get church officials on board to take the political lead for a so-called "inner mission" but failed.

Until 1918 the church was a state church and diaconal ministry was not seen as an essential part of its ministry. Hence, in Germany institutional diaconic work took place not within the church, but outside it.[2] It was rooted, however, in Christian faith and spirituality.

In 1940, while the Nazis oppressed free associations, such as all the diaconic organizations, the church declared diaconic organizations as part of the church and as *"Wesens- und Lebensaeusserung von Kirche"* ("expressions of the essence and life of the church").[3] While this was to protect and preserve these organizations, it was not a sign of inner conviction about diaconic work being essential for the church. Until today, church and diakonia are like two step-sisters, feeling alienated from each other. Diaconic organizations are legally affiliated with the church for their tax status as non-profit organizations, church

1. In our international Master program we talk about "diaconic" management and "diaconic" organizations. I will employ this wording.

2. Cf. Gerhard K. Schaefer, "Kirche und Diakonie: Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven," in Heinz Schmidt, Klaus D. Hildemann, *Nächstenliebe und Organisation. Zur Zukunft einer polyhybriden Diakonie in zivilgesellschaftlicher Perspektive* (Leipzig: VWGTh, 2012), 37: 125–128.

3. Schaefer, 130.

leaders belong to the board of directors, and some diaconic leaders will be members of church synods. But overall church and diaconic organizations are two separate systems with different financial sources and separate structures and leadership models. While the church in Germany is organized in analogy to the public sector, diaconic organizations function as economic enterprises in a market situation.

Diaconic work in Germany grew tremendously until 1990. Professional training for all kinds of social professions (for example, nursing, care for elderly people, work with handicapped people, or social work) were founded by diaconic organizations. With the development of social insurance and social laws, diaconic work became an important pillar of the social system in Germany. Subsidiarity and solidarity were the basic political principles. The following system was established: it is the task of the state to care for people's needs but the state does not have to do this work itself; it only has to provide the necessary funding. The work is better done by independent groups, like diaconic associations, catholic organizations, the Red Cross, and other societies, who receive public funding for their work. After the end of World War II in 1945, diaconic organizations were active in reconstructing the German social system and continue to be the main social actors in the society. Today, more than 1.1 million people work in social institutions connected to the Protestant (Diakonie) or Catholic Church (Caritas). The social services of the churches are one of Germany's biggest employers.

In the late 1980s, the policy of public funding was changed. Private enterprises were encouraged to enter the social services market. Additionally, the formula for funding was changed from "covering all demands" to "performance orientation" with fixed rates for certain kinds of services. An active market developed and diaconic organizations had to act as entrepreneurs in order to survive. They had to begin to compete with others to access public funding. Money from the church or from congregations is only 1 percent of the total budget, so diaconic organizations rely heavily on public funding. Their budgets are much larger than those of the church. In using an analogy from Luke 10, diaconic organizations are no longer the Good Samaritan, but the innkeeper. But some go so far as to say: "We are not even the innkeeper, because we do not receive sufficient money for our services." Some organizations are in a desperate financial status or have already collapsed.

For the churches, the transformation of diaconic organizations into "corporate structures" seemed strange, following the economic rules employed by professional management. Church officials did not understand why diaconic activities had turned into corporations with 5,000 employees, having to adopt the managerial behavior and policies of economic enterprises. "You are not Christian anymore," was the general accusation by the church. "You have to put more emphasis on Christian faith," and "You have to work closer with church offices," were the concomitant expectations. To diaconic leaders, this sounded like disturbing meddling in a financially difficult situation. A power struggle evolved and is still going on. Both sides feel the other side does not understand the situation.

In the leadership of "diaconic enterprises" you will find people with training in business administration, some with a background in the social sciences, and some with a theological education. The challenge is to address professional standards, economic limits, and spiritual needs. Questions about "Christian

management" and a diaconic science have emerged. This scientific approach, originally rooted in practical theology, has an interdisciplinary perspective and draws upon theological thinking as well as economic and social theories. It has initiated research on the special challenges of social work in diaconic organizations under the conditions of the German social system. Today we talk about "multi-rational management" that includes theological perspectives.[4]

One of the central questions becomes: Is there a difference between the services of diaconic organizations and those of private initiatives or other welfare organizations like the Red Cross? Discovering an answer to this question is one of the challenges facing these organizations, which consider themselves as "love expressed in structures."[5] There are two viewpoints in this discussion. Some say there is no special Christian way of helping; the help is Christian in and of itself and does not need any "baptism." It is human to help others and in a secular society Christian values, like respect and dignity, have become common standards for social work. So we just have to do good social work.[6]

Others say that there is a difference, not in the social practice itself but in its interpretation. There is a Christian horizon with regard to the inherent meaning and motivation of social work, and for dealing with difficulties and mistakes.[7] My personal approach deals with diaconic corporate culture that makes a distinctive difference. The way we create rituals, the symbols we employ, the way we deal with limitations, the rites of passage we use for clients or employees, the way we decorate our nursing homes, and how we celebrate Sundays and Christian festivals—all of these are ways to make a difference for those who work for, live at, or ask for support of diaconic organizations.[8]

Diaconal ministry and diaconic theology

What is the significance of diaconal ministry in all these reflections about funding and structures? In the nineteenth century, Christian faith and diaconic work were strongly connected. Those who became active were Christians; the diaconic work was an expression of their faith. Membership in a "diaconic community" of deacons or deaconesses was a special way of life for those who wanted to dedicate their lives to working for the poor and needy. The more professionalized social work became, the more it was opened up for people who were members of a Christian church but not members of a particular spiritual community. The tremendous growth of the organizations in the twentieth century created the need for professionals in social work. If people wanted to work in Diakonie or Caritas, they were supposed to be Christians and

4. See Kuno Schedler and Johannes Rüegg-Stürm, *Multirationales Management* (Bern: Haupt, 2013).

5. Werner M. Ruschke, *Spannungsfelder heutiger Diakonie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 27.

6. Heinz Rügger and Christoph Sigrist, *Diakonie—eine Einführung. Zur theologischen Begründung helfenden Handelns* (Zürich: TVZ, 2011), 143.

7. Thorsten Moos, "Kirche bei Bedarf. Zum Verhältnis von Diakonie und Kirche aus theologischer Sicht," in *Zeitschrift für evangelisches Kirchenrecht* 58 (2013): 253–279.

8. Beate Hofmann: *Diakonische Unternehmenskultur. Handbuch für Führungskräfte*, 2nd edition (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010).

affiliated with a congregation. That was enough. The main focus in hiring was on professional standards that had to be met, not on a certain spiritual life or conviction.

For example, the Bodelschwing Institutions at Bethel ("von Bodelschwingschen Stiftungen Bethel") is the largest diaconic organization in Europe with 17,000 employees and activities all over northern Germany. Only 2.7 percent of the employees are members of one of the two spiritual communities in Bethel; Sarepta, the deaconess community, had up to 2000 sisters in the 1930s, and Nazareth, one of the largest deacon communities in Germany, has about 1000 members. From the 1870s until the 1950s they were the center of diaconic work at Bethel but now they have been moved to the margins and search for their role in "passing on the fire" instead of "taking care of the ashes."

The question of diaconal ministry was discussed within the German church but has not been resolved.[9] Initiatives to establish diaconal ministry—according to the biblical witness of Acts 6—as a second office in the church next to the pastoral ministry were not successful. The synods did not really discuss the issue. The role of deacons in the church, their spiritual tasks, and their "ordination" are still unclear and vary among regional churches. They consider themselves as a bridge between church and diakonia, between faith and social responsibility, and describe diaconic work as "the pulpit that is placed in the midst of the social challenges in our society."[10] But with regard to questions of ordination and church hierarchy, they feel treated as second class. Within theological thinking and research at the seminaries and universities, diaconal ministry and the theological challenges of diaconic work play a minor role and are hardly touched upon in the training of future pastors. On the other hand, regular theological training is not sufficient to prepare one to lead a diaconic organization, which has more than a thousand employees and hundreds of millions in terms of budget.

The contribution of theologically trained deacons or diaconal ministers to social service institutions is controversial. Some think the theological perspective is not needed anymore. Others see their contribution in advocating for the spiritual and ethical perspectives necessary for multi-rational leadership. Theologically trained people provide knowledge about the historical and spiritual roots of diaconic work and theological reflection about urgent questions in diaconic organizations. They provide a link to the church, knowing how church committees and congregations work and make decisions. Yet they have to prove the relevance of the gospel for social work and the helpfulness of spiritual practices in coping with the challenges and dilemmas of diaconic work. Their theology will be inductive, coming from the practical questions of working with deprived people. However, theological training alone is not enough for diaconal ministers and deacons. It also needs knowledge regarding the social and economic dimensions of social service organizations. Therefore in Germany deacons receive training in social work

9. "Der evangelische Diakonat als geordnetes Amt der Kirche," Evangelische Kirche Deutschland-Texte 58, 1996; Annette Noller, Ellen Eidt, and Heinz Schmidt, *Diakonat—theologische und sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf ein kirchliches Amt. Diakonat—Theoriekonzept und Praxisentwicklung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012).

10. This phrase comes from Juergen Gohde, the former president of "Diakonie" in Germany. See Juergen Gohde, *Diakonie auf dem Pruefstand* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2007), 132.

as well as in theology.

Current challenges

In German ecclesiological thinking within the last twenty years, there are very few authors who deal with diakonia as a way of communicating the gospel.[11] There is a lot of concern about mission and how the church could grow, as well as about church structure and reform. But concern about a missional church, a church that participates in the *missio dei* and follows Christ in his concern for people and their needs, that is something with which churches and theology have difficulty.[12] Ignorance about diaconic work in mainstream Protestant theology clashes with the social importance of diaconic work. Empirical research among church members demonstrates that diaconic work is an important reason for church membership: "I am a member of the church because it takes care of poor, sick, and needy people."[13] This is one of the most important reasons for church membership and for continuing to pay the church tax. Diakonia is the public face of the church and the most important branch of church work in the public arena. For those who look from outside, church and diakonia are inseparable. The institutional separation is not evident nor understandable to public opinion.

Diaconic work also confronts high expectations in financial as well as in social terms. Frequently, diaconic leaders hear the following argument both from politicians and from people in need: "If there is no public funding, you still have to help, because you have the church tax and all the donations." Professionals in diaconic work have to be caring, loving, patient, and may not fail. Dealing with these high expectations—which are usually raised only when people are dissatisfied about diaconic services—is one of the pastoral challenges in diaconic work.

Another challenge is the tendency within congregations to delegate all social concerns to diakonia. Their bottom line often sounds like this: "It is their business to take care of people's needs, so we do not have to bother." This mindset neglects the strong connection between faith and love. However, this points out a theological tension in Lutheran thought. Since good deeds are not relevant for salvation, the theological foundation of diakonia becomes weakened. The main lines of theological argument are that "a good tree bears good fruit" and that "Christian freedom about the need to save oneself leads to the service to others."[14] Thus diakonia

11. You find almost no awareness of diaconal ministry in the following books: Christian Albrecht, ed., *Kirche* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Jan Hermelink, *Kirchliche Organisation und das Jenseits des Glaubens. Eine praktisch-theologische Theorie der evangelischen Kirche* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011);

Isolde Karle, *Kirche im Reformstress,* 2nd edition (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011).

Others authors touch upon the issue of diakonia, for example, Eberhard Hausschild, Eberhard Hausschild, and Uta Pohl-Patalong, *Kirche. Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie. Volume 4* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013) or Reiner Preul, *Kirchentheorie. Wesen. Gestalt und Funktion der Evangelischen Kirche* (Berlin: Gruyter, 1997).

12. Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church. A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998).

13. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), *Engagement und Indifferenz—Kirchenmitgliedschaft als soziale Praxis.* V. EKD-Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft (Hannover: EKD, 2014), 88.

14. Cf. Martin Luther, "Von der

becomes a consequence of faith; it just happens. But if it does not happen, faith is missing something. Somehow diakonia is taken for granted and there is not much theological thinking about it.

A current instance of the struggle regarding the social ministry of congregations is the so-called community-based diakonia. It involves the renewal of an approach to connecting congregations and diaconic services by analyzing the needs of a neighborhood in order to provide the necessary services in cooperation with different social agencies. Congregations—with their volunteers and their networks within a neighborhood (congregations are parish based)—are important partners in this process. However, often congregations initially ask: What is the benefit to us? How does this ministry increase church attendance (at worship, not at other times of the week), if we provide space for groups and outside meetings or if we offer volunteers? It requires a long, slow process to open minds and hearts for such a community- and neighborhood-oriented ministry and to integrate church resources into the network of resources that a diaconic corporation tries to establish. Moreover, church committees often are very slow in reaching a decision, while corporations are rapid in pushing forward. Another tension in this process involves the cooperation between professionals and volunteers. Sometimes professionals feel as though volunteers get "the good part," while they have to do the "dirty work." Sometimes there is even the fear that volunteers take away employment possibilities, because they replace professional work in order to save money. For diaconic corporations the question becomes, "Are volunteers as reliable as professionals or do we need to hire people in order to trust and monitor their work?"

One issue where cooperation seems to work well is in the area of immigration. Currently, Germany has a large number of refugees coming from the war zones in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and from the poverty and violence stricken areas of Africa. Christians want to help because they see the horrible pictures on television. Amid rising social and racist tension within the country, many congregations open churches and homes to welcome refugees. At the same time, they realize the need for professional help to support the refugees with legal assistance and social services. That is where organized diaconic services come in. Such cooperation helps to deconstruct the strong barriers between church and diakonia. There is mutual appreciation and the awareness that both sides need each other, in order to serve in an adequate way.

Another challenge involves the employment policy of diaconic corporations. Up to now, diaconic corporations have tried to hire only Christians. However, we live in a society that is becoming more multicultural and pluralistic, also in terms of religions. There is an increasing number of people without any religious affiliation. In many regions of Germany it is not possible to continue diaconic work without hiring non-Christians. There are prominent voices in church synods, who are demanding the cessation of diaconic services, if they are not provided by Christians. Many others argue for more openness regarding people from other religious backgrounds, as long as they support Christian values. Again there arises a question about diaconic identity and how it is established and created. What are the relevant "Christian values" and how can you introduce them to people and help them incorporate these values into their daily work? How do we

Freiheit eines Christenmenschen" (1520), WA 7: 20–38.

introduce employees without a religious background to Christian rituals in the care of terminal patients? How much should they be expected to participate in worship and devotions? How do they deal with rituals around the church year? What has to happen to offer the message of the gospel as a support in dealing with difficult situations of caring for people under time pressure and money pressure? Empirical research shows that people with a religious background can deal with stress in a better way and are less likely to suffer from burnout.[15] How then do we introduce these supportive aspects of Christian faith to our employees, who are not familiar with Christian faith? All these are questions for research and education. New concepts for spiritual formation for secular people within diaconic services are being developed; new ways of inviting people to participate in Christian rituals and Christian spirituality are being created.

There remain other difficult questions. How do you deal in a Christian way with ethical issues? The church advocates fervently for fair wages. However, nursing in Germany is not paid well. Some churches have attempted to force diaconic corporations to pay higher wages than other organizations. That has led some organizations into bankruptcy and is obviously not a good solution for this problem. Thus we look for an authentic, credible, and sustainable way of dealing with this problem. How do we provide good terminal care despite health insurance not covering the costs? How do we help parents who have decided to raise a handicapped child, if social services do not provide sufficient funding for adequate care? The issues around credibility often also involve money. The challenge is to practice creative stewardship and responsible economic administration in tandem with creative ways of fundraising in a society that is not as used to fundraising and charity as in the United States because of the public welfare system.

A vision for the future

There are places at the cutting edge of social problems, where the future of diaconal ministry as a bridge between diakonia and the church (and between professionals and volunteers) has already started. Every winter a growing number of congregations open their churches during the week, set up tables, cook soup, and invite neighborhood people to have a meal in the church.[16] Homeless and poor people sit next to those who do not want to be alone or who work in the neighborhood and are looking for a quick lunch. A growing number of volunteers help manage the work, while diaconic professionals offer the funding and provide counseling, networks, administration, public relations, and other services. It is a new experience of hospitality by sharing bread, wine, and soup and seeing the relevance of faith, hope, and service. It is an experience of the parable of the great dinner in our time (Luke 14: 15–24).

For reflection and discussion:

What is your concept of the proper relationship between church and diaconic services?

What is the theological foundation of neighbor love and its place in your understanding of the church?

Should Lutheran social services be provided only by Lutherans? Why or why not?

15. Heike Lubatsch: *Führung macht den Unterschied. Arbeitsbedingungen diakonischer Pflege im Krankenhaus.* SI Konkret, 5 (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012).

16. Compare www.vespserkirche.de

Diaconal Musings from Here to There

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A brief history of the diaconate in The Episcopal Church

The historical and theological grounding of the diaconate throughout the centuries is well documented. However, in order to speculate about the future, it is important to consider the contemporary history of the diaconate in The Episcopal Church.

In The Episcopal Church and its three-fold orders of ministry, the diaconate has always been an Order through which presbyters must pass, just as bishops must first be presbyters. For the purposes of this article, however, it is important to set aside what we now call the "transitional diaconate," the six months required as a deacon before ordination to the presbyterate. In so doing, it is easier to understand the distinctive nature of the Order of Deacons and the patterns of their lives and ministries over the last 150 years.

A cursory review of that history tells us that from the 1840s through the 1930s there were male deacons, who were either members of the indigenous communities they served or men who served in remote geographical areas. They functioned in many ways as missionaries and, as presbyters would have it, they did not preside at the Eucharist. They were present with others in sickness and other pastoral care contexts. They taught, preached, and nurtured the community. In addition they exercised diaconal ministry through addressing the needs of the community and its environs. But their primary focus was pastoral and catechumenal as well as diaconal.

By 1885, following the Lutheran pattern introduced by Theodor Fliedner, we saw the emergence of deaconesses. They served faithfully in many regions of the United States, among indigenous communities, in contexts similar to settlement houses, and in teaching and serving. Indeed their work was primarily with those who were poor. Some lived in community with other deaconesses and many did not. This expression of the diaconate ended in 1970, when it became possible to ordain women to the diaconate. Those who were deaconesses at that time became ordained deacons.

A third expression of the diaconate existed from 1952 to 1970. During this time the men who served as deacons were essentially assistants to presbyters. With the post-World War II growth in church attendance, these men were recruited to serve as pastoral and sacramental assistants. While they lent stability and looked after certain needs in the congregation, their work was not set primarily in the context of social ministry.

By 1970, however, following on the heels of liturgical reform and a shift in theology, a new vision of the diaconate was emerging. In fact this would be a decade of remarkable transition. The Episcopal Church was in the midst of using trial liturgies in preparation for a revised *Book of Common Prayer,* including a new ordination rite for the diaconate. In that

rite, we would begin to see an emphasis on serving beyond the walls of the church, as well as the charge to "interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world."[1]

When the book was finally approved and adopted for use in 1979, the vision that was articulated had not yet been lived, thereby requiring studies, consultations, surveys, and, over time, changing the culture of the church. Not only was a new vision articulated in a new ordination rite, the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* was a sharp departure from the previous version of the prayer book in other ways. First, the Eucharist was designated as the primary Sunday service. Second, the baptismal rite was developed in new ways, with the emphasis on public (rather than private) baptisms. Baptism was emphasized as an initiation rite and call to ministry. It included a Baptismal Covenant that reflected these changes, thus clarifying the community's part in supporting the newly baptized, as well as each member's renewal of their own promises in the Covenant together with others.

As a result, this new expression of the diaconate occurred as The Episcopal Church was living into a shift in its own patterns of life. The diaconate and attention to diakonia would indeed be part of that shift.

While this history serves as a cursory review, it sets the stage for what has happened in the last thirty-six years, which may give us some hints about the future of the diaconate. It is important to note that while I believe the diaconate is a vibrant and vital order in our church, it has taken time to reach where we are.

1. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 2007), 543. *The Book of Common Prayer* is a theological document for Episcopalians, as well as a book of worship.

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That is something we often forget. While there are still people who say there is not a common understanding of the diaconate, deacons know better. But for those of us who know this, we still must realize that there are some who have not had long-term experience with this expression of the Order. This is something like the difference between: "After all, it's *already been* thirty-six years since we started using this prayer book," and "After all, it's *only been* thirty-six years since started using this prayer book."

The maturity of the diaconate since 1979

If there is anything we know about the church, it is that change takes time, and that living our theology in practical ways also takes time and practice. In fact, in my recent book titled *Unexpected Consequences,*[2] I suggest that there have been several stages along the way to where deacons currently find themselves. Indeed those stages now serve as a good foundation for where we find the diaconate in today's Episcopal Church.

During the 1970s and 1980s, we witnessed considerable transition, with

2. Susanne Watson Epting, *Unexpected Consequences – the Diaconate Renewed* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015).

deacons adapting from being pastoral and sacramental assistants, to caring for the poor outside the church. Then by the mid to late 1980s and into the late 1990s we witnessed a period of definition. We saw deacons engaging with their congregations in ways that would equip the saints for diaconal ministry, rather than the congregation expecting deacons to do that ministry on their behalf. Deacons began to see themselves as developers of diaconal ministry in others, and began to claim a deeper role in interpreting to the church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.

From the late 1980s to 2009 and beyond, we began to see what I call a period of interpretation. We saw (and continue to see) deacons looking for more ways to *speak to the church.* Deacons in leadership began to talk about "prophetic voice," to look for appropriate training and methods to equip themselves, and to expand formation programs in ways that would bring additional skills to their interpretive role—skills like advocacy, facilitating dialogue, grounding in the prophetic tradition, and community organizing. In meetings of deacon formation directors, we were hearing concerns about the relevance of the church, and deacons were discussing more openly whether our church structures were effective. Groups of deacons within dioceses were acting not only within their local congregations but also working together, in some instances, around issues affecting the larger church and the world, issues like gun violence, capital punishment, and domestic poverty.

Finally from about 2005 on, what I call a stage of integration began to occur. We have begun to see in this vital and vibrant Order that the work from over more than three decades is coming together. We see confidence in "engaging the *diakonia* of all believers," equipping the saints, interpreting the needs of the world, and advocating on local levels and beyond. We see deacons confident in their identity, and strong diocesan communities of deacons with bishops who are actively involved in welcoming creative new assignments. There are archdeacons (deacons who serve in leadership for organizing and attending to deacon community in dioceses), who are helping those deacon communities build relationships with each other and articulate diaconal vision.

As a result of the hard work over these last three or four decades, there are important characteristics about this Order that we can recognize and name, which will make a difference to the future of the diaconate, as well as to the future of the church. As I explain in *Unexpected Consequences,* claiming these characteristics intentionally, together with the rest of the church, may move us toward new and creative ways of being church and new ways of reconciling and justice-making in the world. In today's world, these characteristics are the undergirding for who deacons are, just as Scripture, tradition, and reason are the undergirding of who we are as Episcopalians. While these are not characteristics that work in any kind of linear fashion, they will be easily recognizable if we look at the lives and ministries of effective deacons.

First, today's deacons have an identity that is primarily baptismal. While it has taken some time in The Episcopal Church to recognize what has become a baptismal ecclesiology, it is critical to recognize the way *The Book of Common Prayer* has shaped and deepened our belief. If we believe that baptism is an initiation rite, rather than a way to personal salvation, we know that we all gather around the font. We all have gifts to serve God. Deacons step from within the *laos*—the whole people of God—with a charge from the

church—the whole body of Christ—to be living reminders of the diakonia to which all are called by virtue of that baptism. As such, we are equipped to join others in creating diaconal communities, preparing our congregations to identify and engage God's mission in new ways.

Second, today's deacons are adaptable. We know that throughout history deacons have been asked to play different roles in different times. However, that has never been clearer than in the history of The Episcopal Church itself, as different expressions of the diaconate have been called forward in different decades. While there is nothing that precludes deacons from being paid in The Episcopal Church, few are. Frequently, limited resources are available for engaging in the mission the church seems so focused on, at least of late. Deacons have often learned to do much with very little, to navigate through institutions and agencies that are not always supportive, and to show and tell in creative ways, as interpreters, both inside and outside the church's walls.

Third, we are contextual. In The Episcopal Church, deacons are not required to attend seminary. By and large, deacons remain in their home communities as they engage in education and formation programs. A good share of that training includes understanding our own contexts, enabling us to develop appropriate methods in ministry that suit geography, culture, or social context. This is not to say that we do not learn about the wider world, or that the competencies we must demonstrate do not include churchwide assessment. But it does mean that if we understand how and why our neighbor next door is hungry, we have a way to help congregations locally understand this in practical terms, thereby creating solidarity with others beyond our own communities. From community assessment of gifts and challenges to the use of contextual theology, there is a pattern to our training and thinking that can be shared with the larger church.

More deacons than not have a sense of how important a strong deacon community can be, whether within the context of the diocese or on a churchwide level. Throughout the time since the newly articulated vision of the diaconate, deacons and their allies have taken responsibility for suggesting canonical changes and improvements in educational programs, and they have been collaborative with each other in areas of special ministry.

Finally, even though it took some time, deacons have claimed the charge to be interpreters to the church. As I write in *Unexpected Consequences:* "We have moved steadily away from an understanding of servanthood that means 'reaching down,' to one that reaches out and under the issues we face in the world today."[3] Claiming this interpretive role meets with mixed reactions. It also takes new skills and different vocabularies. And as much as people like to describe deacons as "bridges" between the church and the world, the ordination charge is to interpret to the church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world, which places square responsibility on the church to listen and act. Not all communities are prepared to do that. But the ones who are, who themselves are diaconal communities, are also most likely to be missional communities.

Some thoughts about the future

As I considered the future of the diaconate, particularly in The Episcopal Church—a diaconate recognizable by the aforementioned characteristics and grounded in a new vision of an old

3. Ibid., 124.

Order—I wrote to a few people across the church: a few deacons in leadership and of various ages, a seminary professor, and a young and newly ordained presbyter. We know the church's charge to us. And we know that Christ's mandate has never changed: to love one another, to care for each other, to include and companion one another, to repent with each other, and to start again to live God's vision by God's grace. We know that the Order of deacons in our church now represents maturity, grace, and gift.

Yet while deacons are engaged in creative new ministries and teaching, I reminded my colleagues that deacons continue to be under-represented in almost all aspects of church life. While we like to say, "Show me a healthy deacon community, and I will show you a healthy diocese," and we can point to good programs and diaconal activity, the church's structures do not reflect that activity or understanding of the Order. That does not mean people in the church do not understand anything about deacons. But deacons are optional people in the church. No congregation has to have one. No mandated clergy appointments need be filled by them on committees and commissions, Seminarians do not need to learn about them. And bishops can make or break deacon programs and communities.

So what does that mean in terms of the potential impact on the future of the diaconate and its role for strengthening diakonia in our church?

One of the most helpful responses was from a young deacon. He wrote, "I'm not sure that it's terribly important that deacons are under-represented in the hierarchy of the church (diocesan or otherwise), largely because that very hierarchy is struggling to be relevant to anyone other than itself. In my experience, deacons know who they are and have a pretty solid idea of their identity and are quite relevant in the communities where they serve. Frankly the church needs to catch up."[4] What we read here points to something, no matter how challenging, that deacons offer as a gift to the church. And that is to ask the church to assess her relevance, to assess her willingness to undo whatever gets in the way of those God is depending on us to partner with in creating a reconciled and beautiful world. God's mission is less likely to be accomplished through institutional structures, church governance, strict adherence to polity and maintenance of buildings, or musical instruments and vestments, than by inviting people into relationship in places they find comfortable and safe.

While we could speculate about amazing and creative new ways of being church, the most important thing here is that diaconal leadership is a different kind of leadership. It is collaborative, contextual, and, while understanding the challenges of others, seeks their gifts in addressing those challenges.

I have many times told the story about Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori before she became our presiding bishop. In a committee meeting about "new church starts," she suggested that we should talk to deacons for help in determining where they should be located. People looked puzzled and asked why that would be, to which she responded, "Deacons know where the church is needed."

It is my hope that we will, ever so carefully, begin to intentionally dismantle attitudes and structures that keep us from where the church is needed. That simply must include our education and formation processes. They too fall under the barrier that keeps us from expanding the diaconate to include younger and more

4. Email correspondence with Archdeacon Aaron Perkins, January 27, 2015.

diverse individuals.

Almost without exception, the deacons who replied to my questions about the future responded with the hope that we will continue to reform our educational processes, so they are more accessible to individuals with young families, those whose first language is not English, and those who are tired of waiting for the church to make a difference. There are many young people today who have started their own agencies, and who are looking for sustainable solutions to environmental concerns, income inequality, and racial discrimination. They are already doing the work, but the church fails to see or affirm that work, support it, and find ways to bless it. We should be asking them to be deacons. We should be holding them and their work before our congregations as icons of diakonia. Whether they become deacons or not, we should be offering ways to strengthen and bless the skills and strategies they hold before us.

It would be tempting to consider the limitless and glorious possibilities of how to become the church, other than how we know it now. It would be tempting to suggest countless examples of the ways in which deacons serve and could be faithful and helpful companions as the church transitions into something new. Perhaps we could be helpful in explaining and comforting those who are unsure about the charism of leading from the margins.

But the future of the diaconate? That future depends as much on the future of the church as any possible strength of this Order. For the diaconate does not exist for itself. It exists for the sake of strengthening the body of Christ and that body's witness, action and willingness to engage the world. Indeed this expression of ministry and its future falls squarely on the church.

Teaching seminarians about this tradition and educating our congregations about deacons are only tiny steps. Equipping the saints for diaconal ministry and relationship building are critical to the future of Christ's servant church. To learn about our neighborhoods and the challenges they face, and to understand structures and the individuals who are barriers to moving people out of poverty, food insecurity, lack of education, and inadequate health care—these are things deacons will ask about relentlessly. All this is to be done with flexibility, adaptability, and methods that create alternatives, while at the same time leaning on the prophets, who themselves took the risk to articulate God's vision. I think the church should not expect less than this. But let her be clear, frightening as it may be, that, along with the God of love, she longs to make whatever changes are necessary.

For reflection and discussion:

Just as leaders in diaconal ministry require education and practice, so do all members of Christ's body in the world. What skill development and biblical reflection would be helpful in creating congregations that are diaconal communities?

Consider the idea of a worldwide movement led by those who are poor to create a more just world. How do we begin to build relationships that will make us good partners in that movement?

Consider the ways in which the church wears her privileges. What do you see? What do you lament? What do you hope for?

The Diaconal Ministry of Jesus Christ

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Jesus Christ is a diaconal minister. One of the most apt and accurate descriptions of the ministry of Jesus Christ is the ministry of Word and service. From many angles the New Testament testifies to the servanthood of Jesus: "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Mt 23:11). Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15), ministry of the Word, and Jesus came to serve others, ministry of service: "It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; *just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mt 20:26–28).

That Jesus Christ would become incarnate in the form of a servant was God's plan from eternity: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, *taking the form of a slave,* being born in human likeness" (Phil 2:5–7a). Not only Paul in this text ("Let the same mind be in you...") but Jesus Christ himself commands all his followers to live as ministers of Word and service.

> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you servants are not greater than their master, nor are the messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:12–17).

Jesus Christ ordains his followers to Word and service ministry by the washing of feet. The basin and towel are signs of Word and service ministry for the whole church. What if we as the followers of Jesus Christ were to take him at his Word, making foot washing a sacrament of our church? Love as the spiritual gift and the washing of feet with water as the material sign, all at Jesus' command. How would our church be transformed? Word and service at the heart of the matter!

As these passages indicate, Word and service ministry is not only the ministry of Jesus Christ. It is the ministry Jesus Christ has entrusted to the whole church: "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4:5). Word and service ministry, while made explicit by those serving as diaconal ministers, is really the nature of ministry itself as entrusted by God to the *laos,* the whole people of God in Christ Jesus. Diaconal ministry, as marvelously articulated in the articles in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission,* is at the heart of all ministry, Word and service.

The role of diaconal ministers within the church therefore exists as *sign and*

Not only Paul in this text but Jesus Christ himself commands all his followers to live as ministers of Word and service.

catalyst for what every ministry is called to be by Jesus Christ himself, Word and service. There is no ministry in the name of Jesus Christ that is not an expression of the diaconal calling. This means that as the apostles necessarily raised up deacons for the ministry of Word and service in the early church (Acts 6:1–6), there is an inextricable connection between Word and service ministry and Word and sacrament ministry to this day. This connection, however, is not a matter of hierarchy and subservience but rather one of complementarity and mutual enrichment.

How might we reimagine Word and sacrament ministry in relation to the ministry of Word and service, diaconal ministry as the ministry of the whole people of God? Word and sacrament ministry exists finally as a ministry of service "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). How do Word and sacrament ministers contribute to this service? By so proclaiming the Word and so stewarding the sacraments that the *laos* (laity, whole people of God) are *set free from* everything that prevents them from serving as the diaconal ministers they have been called to be and *set free for* living out their baptismal ordination in all the arenas of daily life where they have been given neighbors to serve—in family, the workplace, the local community, and civil society.

Word and sacrament ministry needs to be renewed among us finally as a ministry oriented toward God's purposes of equipping a diaconal church in service for the life of the world. The ministry of Word and service is neither a threat to nor in competition with Word and sacrament ministry. Rather, Word and sacrament ministry finds its fulfillment only when it is exercised as a contribution toward the vibrancy of a diaconal church, sent and scattered for the ministry of Word and service in all the arenas of daily life.

With this vision of the diaconal ministry of all believers, that is, the neighborliness of all believers, the role of those called as diaconal ministers, or deacons, becomes as crucial for the church in our time as it was in the life of the earliest church. Diaconal ministers, serving in the office of deacon, provide a twofold necessary role on behalf of a diaconal church. First, through the exercise of their own charismatic gifts (with whatever specialization), they *demonstrate the character of Word and service ministry itself,* sent by the church from worship into the world for service to neighbors and bringing the needs of the world to the attention and care of the church. Second, through their ministry diaconal ministers s*erve as catalysts among the whole people of God,* equipping others for service in order that the church remains a diaconal church at the very heart of its identity and mission.

The time has come for the renewal of the deaconate as a historic and inherently necessary office within the Christian church. The future of diaconal ministry involves the ongoing reformation of the entire church to become Word and service ministry to the world in the name of Jesus

Christ. Word and sacrament ministers have the opportunity to become articulate interpreters and strong advocates for the office of diaconal ministers of Word and service, for the sake of the transformation of the post-Christendom church into a missional church that is fully engaged in diaconal ministry in all arenas of daily life: home, school, workplace, community, and world.

Word and sacrament ministry finds its genuine purpose only in alignment with Word and service ministry as that diaconal ministry for which Jesus Christ has prepared and sent the entire church into the world from the beginning. As affirmation and validation of the diaconal office as a ministry necessary for the church to live out its the diaconal calling according to the command of Jesus Christ, we should without delay and with gratitude reclaim for the diaconal office ordination with prayer and the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6) as its initiation rite, the only biblical and historic practice befitting the inherent significance of this calling within the life of the church.

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Book Review

Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed. By Susanne Watson Epting. New York: Morehouse, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8192-2979-3. Paper. vi and 202 pages. $24.00.

Susanne Watson Epting, Episcopal deacon and former Director of the Association for Episcopal Deacons, has written a timely and dynamic book advocating the recovery of the diaconate as catalyst for the renewal of the church in our time. The title derives in part from a declaration about the vocation of the deacon in connecting the ministry of the church to the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world: "This prophetic and interpretive role of the deacon may well be an unanticipated result of the restoration of the order in today's world. In fact, this area of strength is sometimes a point of tension. For while the deacon can point the way toward mission and the building of the church, it is also the deacon who sometimes must ask the church to dismantle those things that get in the way of mission and care for others, inviting her to recreate herself as a servant structure" (v). This book presents the author's journey in diaconal ministry, providing both a historical account of seven developments ("waves") within the Episcopal Church and a vital theology of the diaconate across denominational lines. This study provides abundant evidence of the diaconate's potential to engage all the baptized in the universal diakonia of all believers (127–132).

Fascinating to ELCA readers are those sections exploring the formal process and latent possibilities of the full communion agreement, "Called to Common Mission," for sharing a path to the renewal of the diaconate. A report from 2005 states: "As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option, but an essential part of discipleship. …Member churches and their diaconal ministries should structure diakonia so that it is effective, visible, credible" (116). There is an appeal to ask "how our full communion partnership is contributing to prophetic and practical diakonia and to equipping our various members to take up their call to serve... identifying areas of mutual concern (social services, disaster services, etc.) and how we might strengthen those efforts" (117). While Watson Epting expresses disappointment about the limited harvest thus far from the full communion agreement, especially given the possibilities of the diaconate as a shared ecumenical commitment, she encourages grass root efforts by deacons themselves "to create mutual relationships that move us more adeptly and in more unity toward addressing the needs of the world in which we live" (118).

Among the assets of the diaconate are its adaptable and contextual character, its commitment to life together in diaconal community, and the role of deacons as prophetic interpreters of the world's acute needs to an often complacent church. The diaconate summons the church to imagine new endeavors in theological education and new models of ministry, in order to form and draw upon the particular gifts of deacons. This includes appreciation for the distinctive character of a diaconal spirituality. If the church is to become more effective at involving youth and young adults in the orbit of Christian existence, it simply must take seriously the yearning and groaning of this new generation for the authenticity of the ministry of deacons in response to the world's suffering.

I recommend this book especially to those who are unfamiliar with the history the diaconate and its ecumenical significance for the mission of the church in our time. In particular the renewal of the diaconate depends on the readiness of pastors/priests to understand, embrace, and interpret to the whole church the critically necessary vocation of deacons in equipping the church to serve the neighbors at our doorstep both locally and globally.

Craig L. Nessan

Preaching Helps

Lectionary 16/Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Lectionary 26/18th Sunday after Pentecost

Plenty of Bread in Ordinary Time

I add my deep gratitude for all that Ann Rezny did over the years to make *Currents* a vibrant and beautiful journal. She was not only a gifted graphic artist but very gracious to me when I began my work as editor of "Preaching Helps." She encouraged and shepherded me along as I became part of the *Currents* team. Peace be to her memory and thanks be to God for her creative and faith-filled life.

This issue of "Preaching Helps" spans a longer time than usual taking us from July 19 through September 27. If you have been preaching for several years you know that the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) Year B spends five weeks on John chapter 6. That is a lot of bread! (I sometimes think this is why pastors take vacation in the month of August, at least in this lectionary year.) Our writers will engage almost every verse of this chapter starting on July 26 with John's story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with a boy's lunch. If you're not up for this much bread, you may decide to step outside the RCL for part of the summer. The "Narrative Lectionary" offers three different summer series:Old Testament and Poetry, The Creeds, and Hebrews. These series have specific summer dates but all are available on the Working Preacher website (www.workingpreacher.org). Another possibility is to stay with the lectionary and dig deeply into Ephesians. This letter is the Second Reading for July 12 through August 23. Preaching a series of sermons on an epistle gives people a chance to learn about the setting for the letter, the particular concerns addressed by the writer, and live more fully within the letter rather than dipping a toe in one Sunday. You can encourage people to read the letter at home and imagine themselves as part of the church in Ephesus. You may choose to stay with John 6 for five weeks this summer. If so, you'll find ample help in the following pages.

We return to Mark's gospel on August 30 and begin reading through the letter of James. The abundance of bread in John 6 is challenged by the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 – "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Will there be enough bread for her and her daughter? Late summer is marked by the anticipation of a new school year, rally day, and people returning to worship after summer travels. There is also a sense of wistfulness as vacation days have passed too quickly and children leave home for college for the first time. Even if our lives are no longer marked by the academic calendar, something in our cells remembers end-of-summer as a time when something new is about to happen. Hopefully God's invitation to newness will surprise us even in Ordinary Time:

"For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water."

(Isaiah 35:6b–7a, First Reading for September 6)

Writers for this issue of "Preaching Helps" bring gifts of parish ministry, campus ministry, and seminary teaching. We welcome writers who have been part of *Currents* in the past and several who are new to these pages.

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Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Lectionary 16/Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2015

Jeremiah 23:1–6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11–22
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Engaging the Texts

These words are found on car mirrors on the passenger side: "Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear." The texts assigned for July 19 remind the reader that God is closer than we realize. The Holy One, Creator of the earth and stars, yearns to be close to us creatures. The preacher's task is to be the mirror proclaiming the proximity of God, known fully and up-close in Jesus.

The Lord as shepherd of the flock is a unifying metaphor for this Sunday. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, unfaithful kings have scattered the sheep, devastating the flock, the people of Israel. God promises to bring them back into God's fold. "Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold..." (Jer 23:3) Other shepherds will be needed to help with this work—prophets and God-fearing leaders, including the promised one who will come from the house of David. This one will be called Emmanuel, "God with us," a foreshadowing of the proximity God will choose in the incarnation.

The author of Ephesians writes about God's closeness in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through these events the household of faith is widened and we are enfolded into Jesus' very self, this one is our cornerstone. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Eph 2:13) And a few verses later, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." Any estrangement or separation has been erased. We find ourselves restored to the fold, no longer far off.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus, the shepherd, sends his workers out to heal and do works of compassion. Jesus places himself in the center of the need. "And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."(Mark 6:56) We all want to touch a fringe of his cloak, a hem of his garment, to get close enough to know Christ's healing and love. What does the touching of Jesus' cloak look like in your context? What are the ways Jesus comes close, is near at hand? The God we worship is as close as bread and wine, water in the baptismal font, the person in the pew we greet and extend friendship to, the stranger in whom Christ appears unawares.

In the midst of all the need, Mark tells of Jesus slipping away for retreat. Lest we think we can go non-stop and respond to all the needs that come our way, Jesus models the discipline of rest and Sabbath-taking, going to a place set apart, to be quiet and still. I once heard an archbishop share the prayer of a former pope. Every night before the pope went to bed, he prayed these words, "Dear God, the church is yours. I'm going to bed."

Psalm 23 is the most familiar and intimate of psalms. It provides great comfort, not only because we hear its words at poignant moments, like funerals, at hospital bedsides, and times of crisis. This psalm also comes in every season assuring us of the proximity of God. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Pastoral Reflection

One cold evening I experienced the closeness of God. About forty people gathered in a run-down church to remember those who had died on the streets of the city. We sang hymns, read scripture and listened to a homily. Then came the part of the service where the dead were recognized. Some of the sainted homeless were remembered by just a first name, others had no name at all. We sat in silence as candles were lit for each of the departed, together their flames created an unforgettable light.

In the silence, out from nowhere flew a bird. Its flapping wings and acrobatic flight added strangeness to the quiet. The bird flew toward the chancel

where the candles were burning. As if to bless each one, this presiding minister glided above each candle. As quickly as the bird had come, it vanished. My heart pounded. I noticed one man, his eyes lifted heavenward. I knew he saw the bird. Our eyes met as we shared this secret theophany. His grin, as wide as the state of Montana, was toothless, his hat threadbare, his clothing disheveled. My epiphany partner was probably someone who shared a story of homelessness with those who had died. He had nowhere to lay his head, this modern day shepherd. He gave me a knowing look. Was this God come close, creeping in beside us? I drove home feeling like a child who had seen Narnia for the first time.

In *Cloth for the Cradle* (Wild Goose Worship Group, Iona), a resource for creative worship, are these words about God's proximity.

When the world was dark
And the city was quiet,
You came.
You crept in beside us.

We are no longer far off. God is much closer than we can imagine.

Mary Halvorson

Lectionary 17/Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 26, 2015

2 Kings 4:42–44
Psalm 145:10–18
Ephesians 3:14–21
John 6:1–21

Engaging the Texts

Today's texts offer a rich buffet of hermeneutical choices. When the preacher is face-to-face with a plentiful smorgasbord, it's an opportunity to use texts creatively beyond the sermon. The listener expects to hear the text proclaimed, sometimes sung, but to pray the text together brings scripture close to home. In the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a beautiful prayer. Its appeal reaches to the saints, the incomprehensible mystery and grandeur of God, and the human heart. The prayer is audacious enough to hope we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Like hearty bread that satisfies, this prayer satisfies the soul's hunger to be at home with God. These words would make a lovely prayer of the day, post communion prayer, or could be taken home, encouraging worshippers to use them as a table grace, or prayer to begin and end the day. My adaptation of the text:

Let us bow before God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

God grant us strength in our inner being with power through your Spirit. May Christ dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are rooted and grounded in love. May we have the power to understand, with the saints, what is your breadth and length, height and depth, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so we may be filled with all your fullness. To you, O God, who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

This prayer sets the table for God's generous and imaginative divine in the stories of Elisha in 2 Kings and Jesus in John's gospel. God's abundance hits headlong our human propensity to get sidetracked by the myth of scarcity. There is not enough to go around. Resources are limited. The suffering is overwhelming. The pressing needs of the crowd lead Jesus and his disciples to a mountain retreat, but their retreating doesn't last long. The

crowds track Jesus down, creating an opportunity, a test, a teaching moment for the disciples. In typical fashion, Jesus begins with a question, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He hands his disciples their mission opportunity. Philip takes out his calculator and does the numbers. They don't add up. Andrew notices a boy with food, and makes his own assessment that it is not enough for the crowd. The words from Psalm 145 don't seem to ring in these disciples ears: "The eyes of all wait upon you, O LORD, and you give them their food in due season."

Pastoral Reflection

Before we scapegoat these disciples, chastising them for their lack of imagination and their default mode of scarcity, it's important to admit our own bent toward pragmatic un-imagination. This is often the first line of defense in our congregations, government budgets, and personal giving practices. We've heard these responses before to the world's needs: "We are a poor congregation, we can't afford it, we don't have enough volunteers to do the work." We do our human calculations and there is never enough.

Yet, in spite of themselves, the disciples move beyond their first response, and follow Jesus' instructions. Elisha's servant moves past cynicism and sets out the meager food. In both cases the skeptics are filled with amazement. All who are fed are satisfied. Doggy bags are filled to bring home the leftovers. Words from Ephesians ring, "O God, you are able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine."

Faith is not blind, it's visionary. It sees beyond limited resources and enters the realm of the unlimited goodness of God. Without faith, we frantically try to control what is not in our power to control. Faith invites suspending human calculations, to expect and count on God's intervention in our lives and hungers. Just maybe there will be a miracle or two.

As is so often the case with Jesus, he calls us to a counter-response, a way that doesn't make sense. The gospel calls us to a way of generosity—and it looks like a trust walk.

I once heard this quote on the radio; "Faith is moving ahead, stepping out into the future, without having all the facts." We Christians are constantly being called to places we have never been, to try things we have never tried, to be ways we have never envisioned. Faith is stepping out when we don't have all the facts, stepping out with a few loaves and fishes, into rough waves, trusting God is with us. God will take our meager fare, our loaves and fishes, even our hesitations, and do amazing things.

Henri Nowen once shared a twist on the loaves and fishes story. He imagined the crowd finding themselves strangely moved by the young boy's generosity in sharing his five loaves and two fish. Perhaps a kind of miracle happened in this way: one by one they relaxed their hold on the food concealed in their cloaks and offered their meager fare. Together, the fragments became a veritable feast. God may just be saying to us: imagine the abundance near at hand, within my church, all of you. Let me work through the resources I have already given you. It is enough.

Mary Halvorson

Lectionary 18/Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2015

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15
Psalm 78:23–29
Ephesians 4:1–16
John 6:24–35

Engaging the "Bread of Life" Discourse in John 6

This is the first of four lectionary sections that move through the Bread of Life discourse in John 6. The sign that elicits this dialogue is the feeding of the 5,000 at the beginning of this chapter. This is the only miracle included in all four gospels. In John it is an example of the repeated literary pattern of sign, dialogue, discourse. The signs are extraordinary: changing water into wine, healing a man ill for thirty-eight years, healing a man blind from birth, raising a man from the dead. At the same time, the signs are never called miracles and their descriptions are lean and succinct. The signs themselves are not our focus. The dialogue about each sign reveals its many meanings and Jesus' discourse on the sign interprets both the act itself and the possible meanings that arise from the dialogue.

The feeding story itself provides details that are unique to John. The green grass (6:10) foreshadows Jesus as the good shepherd in chapter 10. The pasture for the sheep signals provision and abundance of life. Jesus himself feeds the crowd, not the disciples. Jesus is the source of abundant life and this is why he can call himself the Bread of Life.

The crowd is "looking for Jesus" (6:24), recalling his first words to the first disciples, "What are you looking for?" (1:38). This question will be repeated in a different form, at the arrest of Jesus (18:4, 7) and the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene: "Whom are you looking for?" (20:15) Jesus calls attention to a possible misinterpretation of what the sign means, that the need for food is fulfilled in the feeding itself. Jesus will unpack the sign he has just performed. Even witnessing the sign will not result in belief, which in the Gospel of John means being in relationship with Jesus.

Verse 31 reveals a level of understanding on the part of the crowd that is like the Samaritan woman's question about the provision of water (4:12). The response of the crowd, like that of the woman at the well, represents instinctively that what Jesus is providing is indispensable for life. As such, the crowd connects Jesus' feeding of the five thousand with God's provision of manna in the wilderness. There is no other answer to what has happened than what has already been revealed, what is already known, what has already been experienced. That God is the source of the feeding of the five thousand is the only logical theological answer.

"Very truly I tell you" is a marker of response and change of focus. The source of the bread from heaven, even in the wilderness, was not Moses but "my father." The first person singular possessive pronoun, not "our" or "your" father, connects Jesus with God, the theological move that Jesus will soon make. The second alteration Jesus makes is adding the adjective "true" to bread, distinguishing himself from the manna in the wilderness. Verse 33 provides even more detail about the bread from heaven, making the distinction that it is the "bread of God," not Moses. God was and is the source of the bread from heaven. Jesus offers two more unique features of this bread: it gives life and it is for the world. Jesus' conversation partners are not only the Jewish leaders or the disciples, but the 5,000 people Jesus fed. They are the world, the world that

God loves (3:16). What does abundant grace, abundant love *taste* like? It tastes like enough fresh bread and fish to satisfy your hunger. The crowd's response to Jesus' words in 6:34 is much like that of the Samaritan woman at the well, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (4:15). For the Samaritan woman and now for the crowd, this is the realization that Jesus is the source of something that they need. While it is still a moment of misunderstanding, there is some progression of recognition of who Jesus is. The Samaritan woman goes from viewing Jesus as a thirsty Jew with dubious manners to someone who is able to provide for her the basic human need of water. The same pattern holds true in the dialogue portion of response to the feeding of the five thousand. A recognition of shared ancestry and history leads to a nascent sense that Jesus might be a source of the basic human need of food.

As a result of this slight advance, Jesus moves the conversation forward with his next statement: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35). This is the first "I AM" statement in John's gospel. That the first "I AM" statement is connected to what is needed to maintain life underscores both the incarnational theology of the gospel and John's emphasis on relationship. Bread has been connected to heaven (6:31–32) and to God (6:33) but now is directly linked with Jesus. The bread is given a modifier, "of life." What this life means beyond its literal promise will be one of the primary foci of the rest of the chapter. One who believes in Jesus will never be hungry or thirsty. The inclusion of thirst has two references for meaning. First, it recalls the conversation with the woman at the well. Jesus has already revealed himself as the source of living water. If that is the case, then Jesus as the living bread is also an expectation that may very well be met. As a result, the link between bread and water affirms that in Jesus, God provides essential needs for life. Second, the reference to water makes sense in the larger context of God's provision for God's people in the wilderness. The discourse thus far has already recalled the point in history when God sent manna from heaven to God's hungry people. Water was also provided for the Israelites by Moses striking the rock at Horeb as God commanded (Exod 17:1–7). That which God provided for God's people, bread and water, Jesus now offers to the crowd. Jesus is able to give what God is able to give. Bread and water are quite literally bread and water but they also represent abundant life.

Karoline Lewis

Lectionary 19/Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2015

1 Kings 19:4–8
Psalm 34:1–8
Ephesians 4:25—5:2
John 6:35, 41–51

Engaging the "Bread of Life" Discourse in John 6

John 6:35 closes the first of the four lectionary passages dedicated to the Bread of Life Discourse and begins this second passage. The lectionary excludes verses 36–40 and the preacher will want to read those verses as background to the complaining in verse 41. This complaining is in response to Jesus' claim, "I am the bread that came down from heaven" (6:41). In the Septuagint, the same word for complaining is heard in Exodus 16. The provision of

bread and water in the wilderness is the primary scriptural story that gives the Fourth Evangelist the imagination to interpret the feeding of the five thousand. At the same time, Jesus reinterprets the feeding story. Verse 42 summarizes one of the primary claims of John 1:1—Jesus' origin. Where does Jesus come from? He is not the son of Joseph, but the son of God. Interestingly, the knowledge of Jesus' father and mother is in present tense. This subtle detail emphasizes Jesus' humanity even as he makes a weighty argument for his divinity. The reference to Jesus' mother reminds us of her presence at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the wedding at Cana, and at the foot of the cross.

One of the critical themes of the Bread of Life passage is how it interprets Jesus' earlier statement: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (1:51). This also points to the reason for this particular Old Testament story as a way of presenting who Jesus is. What this story provides is that the *origin* of the food and water for the Israelites is from heaven, from God. Now Jesus is the source of such food and water, and in addition, we learn where he comes from and where he will return. This story has the function of reiterating the theological sequence that frames the plot line of the Fourth Gospel: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus comes from the Father and will return from the Father. The story of manna not only helps make sense of the feeding of the five thousand but also emphasizes several key points: Jesus' origin, Jesus' identity, and what a relationship with God looks like and means. All three themes were laid out in the very first verse of the Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The question of Jesus' origin is what prompts him to clarify who his father really is. In verses 44–45 Jesus further develops what his relationship with the Father means—for him and for those who believe in him. If there appears to be a certain circularity in these verses, there should be. Jesus is trying to make the case that what the Jews know about their history, what is recorded in scripture and in the prophets, what they have heard and learned from God, all of this is now located in Jesus' revelation as the Word made flesh.

Verse 46 recalls 1:18, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Jesus has seen the Father because he comes from the Father. He is God made flesh. The reason for the incarnation is for us now to see God, to experience God in the fullness of relationship that was assumed in the wilderness, but could only be known to a certain level. What Jesus is doing here is to say, in me you see God in a way you have never seen God before.

Verse 47 names the promise of eternal life again, setting up verses that detail what Jesus means by eternal life and anticipating the conflict and difficulty ahead. In verse 48 Jesus repeats the primary "I AM" statement of this discourse, but what follows should send shock waves through any listener or reader of this Gospel. Jesus has described himself as the bread of life in moderately acceptable theological claims, then this startling statement, "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." This is Jesus at his transparent best. The blatancy of the claim, "and they died" stands in direct contrast to the imagery of eternal life developed up to this point. As a result, "eternal life" is reevaluated through this new declaration, "and they died." In addition to this forth-

right assertion are two details that should cause significant pause. First, Jesus uses the second person possessive pronoun, "your ancestors" not "our ancestors." Whether a play on the question of Jesus' ancestry or a subtle reminder of the reality of John's audience, it has the effect of augmenting potential conflict already simmering in this dialogue. Second, the term "ancestors" illumines the already established theme of relationship, parenthood, family, and community. It raises a larger theological issue at stake in this Gospel: who is family? Can ancestry look forward and not just backward? Is God imagining a larger familial structure in drawing people in (6:44) who are not of this fold (10:16)?

"This is the bread that comes down from heaven" (6:50) is a moderate, third person statement before the more upfront self-revelation in 6:51, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." Verse 51 both closes this lectionary passage and opens the next pericope. This verse may best be seen as an opening because it introduces a new level of interpretation of the sign: the connection of the bread from heaven with Jesus' own flesh. For the sake of preaching through the Bread of Life discourse, the preacher might want to consider ending this section at 6:50, reserving verse 51 for the next week. In verse 50, "This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die," the emphasis on eternal life is given a particular focus: the promise of the absence of death. One direction for preaching the second section of the discourse is to start from the end and work backwards.

Karoline Lewis

Lectionary 20/Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2015

Proverbs 9:1–6
Psalm 34:9–14
Ephesians 5:15–20
John 6:51–58

Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
—Psalm 34:11

Engaging the Texts

Today offers a rare opportunity to let the Wisdom tradition within scripture take the lead as we hear the lovely lection from Proverbs 9 that is sometimes called "Wisdom's Feast." It invites us to hear our other readings from Ephesians and John 6 (and Psalm 34 also) with ears specially attuned to the ways in which the Word for today is being played in the key of wisdom, that minor strain of biblical literature that is chiefly thought of in terms of writings like Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon and Job. But wisdom is also at home in the New Testament in places like James and Ephesians and in the Gospel of John, where Jesus is portrayed as the great teacher or rabbi whom we find declaring today cryptically enough, "I am the living bread who comes down from heaven…." and who in the synoptic Gospels teaches so characteristically by means of riddling parables, using the most common, everyday things of life to evoke the secret of the kingdom of God. (For a biblical theology especially appreciative of the Bible's wisdom tradition see Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence,* (San Francisco; Harper and Row, 1978).

Wisdom, from a biblical perspective is the fruit of reflection upon experience in the light of God's living Word—and so it is not a human accomplishment but is the

gift of God's Spirit. Today's reading from Ephesians contains a good example: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish [the antonym of wise] but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery but be filled with the Spirit" (6:15–18)—the discerning Spirit of God's Wisdom. Wisdom is good advice raised to a higher degree, uncommonly good because godly sense.

One of the intriguing aspects of the figure of Wisdom as portrayed in scripture is that wisdom is not only a feminine noun but is portrayed as a woman—even as God's "consort" or "darling child" in a passage like Proverbs 8 in which Wisdom is "at once the delight of the creator and the companion of human beings" while also being "a member of the family of God." The prologue to John's Gospel sounds itself like a wisdom hymn to the eternal Word with echoes of Proverbs' reference to preexistent Wisdom, "begotten not made" (Terrien, pp. 356–357).

In today's brief reading from Proverbs 9, Wisdom is portrayed as an enthusiastic hostess, who has carefully set her table, planned and prepared her multi-coursed meal, chosen and decanted her wine all in readiness to welcome guests to her table. Who are the guests? To this task she delegates her servant girls who are sent out into the town with the open invitation, "You that are simple, turn in here!" and to those without sense "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." It is a metaphor, an image, after all, that Proverbs is offering us that we, too—simple and without sense as we may be—are especially welcomed to Wisdom's feast.

Pastoral Reflection

Christians cannot hear Wisdom's feast, of course, without thinking of Jesus, his characteristic table fellowship with the religiously excluded, his feeding of the five thousand, his parable of the great banquet, and his final meal with his friends, which the church would commemorate ever after as its central act of worship. Around the table we trust Jesus' words—as in today's Gospel reading—that in this simple meal of bread and wine, a true eating and drinking of Jesus' own body and blood is being experienced in which the original host himself becomes the meal—the living bread come down from heaven. It is not hard to imagine that Wisdom's feast from Proverbs 9 may well have been one of Jesus' favorite passages from his people's scriptures.

In my first parish I had a non-communing member named Elo who never came to worship but came to every other sort of eating opportunity we hosted—monthly birthday dinners, Thanksgiving dinners, pot-lucks, senior citizen lunches, you name it. I once asked him, "Elo, why is it you come to nearly every meal we offer but never come to church for worship." He looked at me with a sparkle in his eye and said: "I'm just an eating member of the church!" Well, that didn't fully answer my question or my concern for Elo's spiritual well-being—I wanted him to feel welcome at the Lord's table as well as at all those other tables. But I smiled and nodded my head that, yes indeed, there is a sense in which we're all just "eating members" of the church—and maybe, just maybe, Elo had a more comprehensive idea of Holy Communion than I did.

"Turn in here"—Wisdom's invitation to her banquet—also might to be taken up by the church generally as our invitation to others to "come and see" what it is that is offered here. And thanks to Ephesians

we're told that this matter of being filled with the Spirit of Wisdom has certain outcomes of which one is music, or if you will, participatory song. "Be filled with the Spirit," our reading from Ephesians closes, "as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (18b–20). "All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir" is part of the church's invitation as well, creating the "dinner music" essential to truly eucharistic worship.

John Rollefson

Lectionary 21/Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2015

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18
Psalm 34:15–22
Ephesians 6:10–20
John 6:56–69

> The Lord is near to the broken-hearted,
> and saves the crushed in spirit.
> —Psalm 34:18

Engaging the Texts

For five weeks now we've been working our way through the 6th chapter of John's Gospel that consists of Jesus' **l-o-n-g** soliloquy on what it means for him to claim: "I am the bread of life." Today Jesus ends his sermon—as all sermons must finally end—and it's at least reassuring to us preacher-types that even Jesus' sermons didn't always receive a polite and positive hearing.

In fact, John reports, "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it'" (v. 60)? The Greek word translated as "difficult" is *skleros*—like "sclerosis" in English—but in Greek it can also mean "dry" as well as "hard." Its connotations also incude, my lexicon tells me, "harsh" or "rough," "stiff" or "stark," "austere" or "stern." "Too tough to swallow," I'd translate it. "Difficult" is just too wishy-washy. "A rough, crude teaching." "Who wants to hear that?" I imagine his disciples saying. And yes, please notice that it's his disciples—not the crowd, nor the scribes, nor the Pharisees—but his own followers and friends who find Jesus' teaching about the bread of life, and especially about the need for them to "eat my body, drink my blood" too hard to swallow (oops, forgive the pun).

But Jesus, being a good teacher and not insensible to the cool reception his sermon had received, asks his disciples (I like to think, with a slight smile lifting the corners of his mouth), "Does this offend you?" Again a weak translation, for the Greek literally says, "Does this scandalize you? Do you find this a stumbling block?" Indeed it must have, for John bothers to tell us that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." This matter of "eating his body and drinking his blood" was apparently the straw that broke the camel's back for some who had counted themselves among his followers. So Jesus turns to the twelve, the inner circle of disciples, and asks them with what one commentator calls "unsettling directness": "Do you also wish to go away?"

Pastoral Reflection

I imagine Jesus asking the question sadly, sighing as his shoulders sagged a little, as he saw one-time followers in whom he'd invested a great deal of himself shaking their heads in disbelief or dissatisfaction or whatever it is that disillusions folks who'd once evidenced excitement and commitment. I've seen it in church members who get mad or

frustrated about something or at someone and threaten to leave, or just stop coming and won't even make the effort to explain why. Jesus' question, "Do you also want to go away?" makes him sound almost pathetic, doesn't it?

But to be honest, I've got to admit that there are times when I myself have been tempted to answer "Yep" to Jesus' question. Yep, I've had it with this church business—enough prejudice, enough injustice, enough hardheadedness, enough stinginess, enough guilt over my own inadequacies or mistakes, enough seemingly endless church meetings—like when our Synod Assembly couldn't even manage to pass a resolution against torture!

"Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus asks. But the question isn't one Jesus invented. It really goes back to Adam and Eve in the Garden and, as Jesus himself suggests in John 6, is epitomized in Israel's wilderness wanderings only made possible by Yahweh's life-sustaining gift of manna—about which the Israelites incessantly complained—culminating in today's climactic story from the book of Joshua. "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua urges the people at a critical juncture in their history but "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Josh 24:15). "You gotta' serve somebody," Bob Dylan taught us to sing during his all-too-brief evangelical phase. "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta' serve somebody." But Israel's well-meaning if sanctimonious opting for Yahweh, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods," (v. 16) once again reveals that our human choosing is never the final word, however good the intentions. Only God's choosing to remain loyal to the covenant promises is finally what matters, hard as the prophets will try to remind Israel and us of our covenant obligations.

For, as our reading from Ephesians reminds us, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (6:12). For all the bravado of Ephesians' image of our being clad in "the whole armor of God" with its allegorical array of defensive weapons arrayed against "that evil day," I've long found the transfigured military image imbedded in Bonhoeffer's late prison poem, "Who Am I?" far more compelling because it is rooted in Jesus' hard saying of what it means to participate in his body and blood:

> Who am I? This or the other?
> Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
> Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
> and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
> Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
> fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
> Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
> Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.
>
> *--Letters and Papers from Prison,* (New York, 1971), 189.

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit," the psalmist promises.

If there's any choosing involved, I'll opt for that God!

John Rollefson

Lectionary 22/Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 30, 2015

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9
Psalm 15
James 1:17–27
Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Engaging the Texts

This Sunday we return to Mark's gospel after five weeks in the sixth chapter of John. We also begin reading through the letter of James. We know Luther didn't speak very highly about James in his Introduction to the New Testament: "Therefore, St. James' Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle…for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind." But those of us who emphasize God's free gift of grace may need to hear this "straw epistle" more fully now and then, especially James' call to put our faith into action. Some preachers may consider a sermon series on the book of James for the next several Sundays. (But you'll miss some important gospel stories.)

We hear Deuteronomy 4 and Mark 7 in conversation today. The Deuteronomist's point of view shapes the First Reading: obey God's law and you will be blessed, in this case, blessed with the land. Specific laws aren't laid out in these verses, but the second reading of the Ten Commandments comes in the next chapter, followed by many other statutes in chapters 12–26. In the Mark reading Jesus seems particularly mindful of Deut 4:2: "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it…" It's the adding that Jesus is most concerned about.

Pastoral Reflection

Here's something strange: Jesus scolds the Pharisees for doing what most of us do every day—wash our hands before eating, wash food from the market, and wash our pots and pans! What's so bad about being clean? Jesus wasn't advising people to stay dirty, but to take care that washing and other human traditions didn't become the test of faithfulness. "There's nothing outside a person that by going in can defile," Jesus said, "but the things that come out are what defile." Jesus is concerned about our hearts. Washing our hands is useless if our hearts aren't turned toward God.

Some scholars have said that this insistence on washing was about far more than hygiene. It was about purity, about marking boundaries between the Pharisees and those they judged to be disobeying God. Many contemporary preachers have described Jesus' ministry as challenging the purity system of the Pharisees—and perhaps "all the Jews" (7:3). Jesus replaced purity with compassion. That sounds wonderful! Except we blame the Pharisees once more and get ourselves off the hook. Jesus isn't talking to us—the problem is the Pharisees.

By blaming the Pharisees we may end up demeaning the Jews and diminishing the importance of God's law. It can be too easy to equate "Pharisees" with "hypocrites." A Roman Catholic document on preaching gives us a different picture:

Jesus was perhaps closer to the Pharisees in his religious vision than to any other group of his time…Many scholars are of the view that Jesus was not so much arguing against "the Pharisees" as a group, as he was condemning excesses of some Pharisees, excesses of a sort that can be found among some Christians as well. [1]

1. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching* (Washington, D.C.: United

We need to remind people that Jesus, his disciples, and most of those who followed him were Jewish. Jesus was concerned about all those laws that had been added over time, laws that were almost impossible for ordinary people to follow. In Mark 12 a scribe (Jewish) asked Jesus which commandment was greatest. Jesus' answer was very Jewish: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater that these." The scribe commends Jesus for his answer—and echoes what Jesus has just said. Then Jesus tells the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This is one of few places in the gospels where Jesus and a Jewish leader are not in conflict.

If we are honest, we know that Pharisees aren't the only ones who have added laws and traditions over the years. We Christians have added plenty of our own statutes and ordinances. When I was growing up, dancing and card playing were considered sinful. When the Star Theater in my Iowa hometown began showing movies on Sunday, members of a church in a nearby town said they were living "seven miles from hell." For most of Christian history, women could not be ordained. Was scripture the only reason or did "the tradition of the elders" play a role? Many of our "laws" have also been about purity, about marking clear boundaries between holy people (us) and sinful people (them).

Jesus will learn a lesson about boundaries in the story that follows today's gospel when a Syrophoenician woman begs him to heal her daughter. She teaches Jesus a thing or two about expanding his boundaries. What boundaries have we built up in our own lives or in our congregations? Are we spending our time and energy trying to keep the church pure?

Maybe Jesus has more important work for us to do.

Barbara Lundblad

Lectionary 23/15th Sunday after Pentecost September 6, 2015

Isaiah 35:4–7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1–10, [11–13], 14–17
Mark 7:24–37

Engaging the Texts

The First Reading is usually heard during Advent, but is chosen for this Sunday to relate to two healing stories in Mark. In many ways Isaiah 35 is a word out of place—not only in the wrong season, but the language is closer to Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55). Perhaps the scribes knew people would need to hear words of hope after the judgment against the nations and very harsh words against Israel.

For Lutheran preachers the reading from James 2 seems to contradict the core teaching of justification by grace through faith. We know the formula by heart. James says basically, "So what?" He's very clear. "What good is it, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" Well, some Lutherans will shout, "Yes!" We can imagine the scene in our own congregations: a "person with gold rings and fine clothes" and "a poor person in dirty clothes" walk into the sanctuary. What do we do? This text will be heard in different ways in different settings. In James' community most of the people

States Catholic Conference, 1988) #19.

listening were poor themselves. That may not be true in our congregations.

Even if you've been preaching your way through James it's important today to say something about Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman. Nobody wants to hear Jesus say the things he says to this woman. She's a Gentile; he's a Jew. She's in her homeland of Tyre; Jesus is the foreigner. Tyre wasn't just a vacation spot but home to people who had been Israel's enemies. In Ezekiel 26, 27, and 28, the prophet rails against the people of Tyre: "See, I am against you, O Tyre! I will hurl many nations against you." (Ezek 26:3) Perhaps Jesus had heard stories about the people of Tyre since childhood. Now here was an enemy Syrophoenician woman begging him to heal her daughter.

Jesus is changed by this woman's tenacity and truthfulness: the children have already been fed—5,000 of them on the hillside with plenty left over. Surely there's something left for my daughter! Mark is such a skilled storyteller. In the chapter before, 5,000 people are fed, with twelve baskets left over—one for each tribe of Israel. In the chapter after Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, 4,000 people are fed with seven baskets left over—the number of wholeness, all nations, including the Gentiles. Between these two feeding stories, a Gentile woman expands Jesus' boundaries of the chosen people. She marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry. In the second story in today's gospel, Jesus cures a deaf man who has a speech impediment. It's a very earthy healing—Jesus' fingers in the man's ears and his spit on the man's tongue. "Ephphatha!" Jesus says, "Be opened!" In some ways, that word had been spoken to Jesus in the earlier story. A Syrophoenician woman said to Jesus, "Be opened!" to a more expansive vision of the people of God.Pastoral Reflection

Dare to challenge the usual interpretations of these texts. For people with disabilities the healing texts in the Bible can be "texts of terror." Everyone is always cured but people who are disabled remain disabled in our congregations. You might consider using a litany that gives countertestimony to the promises of healing in Isaiah 35:

> Then the blind woman and her dog
> **shall process with the choir;**
> the deaf man who sees what we often miss
> **shall paint the text on the sanctuary walls;**
> the veteran in the wheelchair
> **shall break the bread of life,**
> and the homeless man who cannot speak
> **shall sign the hymns for everyone to see.**

Don't try to make Jesus look good in the gospel story. In the creed we say that Jesus became "truly human"—but we don't want him to be too human! Preachers have tried many ways to put a good spin on this text. Jesus was testing this woman and when he saw her faith, Jesus healed her daughter. (But she doesn't say anything about faith.) Jesus did call her a dog, but the Greek word there is *kunarios*, meaning little dogs. Puppies. (Does that make it better?) There's one more option that's been tried: because she bowed down before Jesus, this is a story about submission. The woman submitted to Jesus; therefore, he healed her daughter. (But she doesn't seem very submissive.)

Mark didn't feel the need to protect or save Jesus. Mark didn't fix up this story. If we believe the incarnation then it's a matter of faith to see that Jesus is truly human. Jesus was converted that day in Tyre.

Another reason we need to really see

and hear this woman is that she is not past tense. She comes again and again in every generation: a Palestinian woman with her sick daughter waiting endlessly at an Israeli checkpoint; an African American mother praying that her teenage son will come home safely; a transgender woman pleading that no one will beat her up; a poor undocumented woman afraid to take her daughter to the emergency room. Can we hear her? Can we be converted to a more expansive vision of the commonwealth of God?

Jesus turns to us and says, "Ephphatha! Be opened!"

Barbara Lundblad

Lectionary 24/Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 13, 2015

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 116:1–9
James 3:1–12
Mark 8:27–38

Preaching Jeremiah

The act of speaking and the power of words become major themes in today's texts. In the first reading from Isaiah, the servant describes his task of bringing a message: "The LORD God has given me the tongue of a teacher." The word taught by the teacher here is one that sustains the weary, yet the messenger's task has also not been without struggle. The messenger has endured striking, insulting, beard-pulling, and spitting. In the midst of all of this antagonism, the messenger still trusts in God, even to the point of encouraging disagreement. In verse 8, like an athlete trash-talking an opponent on the basketball court, he goads, "Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me." It is like the prophet is saying, "Bring it on!"

As preachers, we may be wise to wonder how our own proclamation encourages disagreement. How open are we to differing opinions? Do we play it safe, lest we offend, or do we trust God to use our words for agitation or disruptive innovation? How do the words spoken in our pulpits engage even those with whom we have had conflict?

Preaching James

Keenly aware of the instructions in James for one teaching words of error, the preacher may also be somewhat tempted to forsake a sermon and leave a period of silence, thus avoiding the possibility of using words in ways that destroy, rather than build up. James gives instruction for living a Christian life, drawing on moral and social themes. What we say matters. The tongue is a small piece of the body, but can make a large impact. James illustrates this concept with several examples from daily life: a horse's bridle, a boat rudder, and a flame in a forest. All three examples are small and insignificant at first glance, yet can drastically impact something else much larger.

James invites us to think about the language we use. This is an opportune time to address the problem of bullying. In schools, workplaces, and even in congregations, untamed tongues can proclaim a message contrary to the welcoming love that God shows us through Jesus. Recent news stories of transgender youth taking their own lives have magnified the power that words have to shame, dehumanize, and destroy. When we gossip or tease, we have the potential to ostracize and exclude. As Christian people, however, we also have the potential to proclaim words that gather and encourage. What, then, shall we say?

Small things can also make a positive impact. The preacher can comb local

contexts for examples of seemingly tiny situations making a major difference. Perhaps one family has taken in a host of foster children. Perhaps a group of low-income residents is organizing to address a justice issue in the community. Perhaps parishioners are writing letters to legislators about world hunger. What major impact is happening in small, incremental steps?

Preaching Mark

In the Gospel, Peter is asked to speak a word of identity about Jesus, naming him as the Messiah. Jesus then explains what it means to be this Anointed One. It means an experience of rejection, suffering, and death. Peter likely has a different understanding of what is to happen. Strong words are exchanged between them. The way of Jesus is not always what we expect. It does not always make us comfortable.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). This could either be taken as a winsome invitation to Christian discipleship, or as an oppressive admonition to perpetuate injustice. An abused woman should not be told to remain in a violent relationship for the sake of bearing her cross. Low-income workers should not be told to forego a living wage as a form of cruciform self-denial. The theology of the cross is not an encouragement to seek out forms of suffering and pain. Rather, the cross points us to Christ suffering alongside us, in the midst of conflict, pain, and uncertainty. Bearing one's cross is an act of solidarity with those who suffer around us, but it is also a sign of unity with Christ who meets us in our own brokenness. As we preach and teach, we have the responsibility to invite listeners to seeing the crucified Jesus in their own lives. May the words we use point us all to new life.

Paul Bailie

Lectionary 25/Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 20, 2015

Jeremiah 11:18–20
Psalm 54
James 3:13–4:3, 7–8a
Mark 9:30–37

Preaching Jeremiah

Jeremiah 11:18–20 is a poetic passage that reflects the danger that the prophet faces upon bringing a message of judgment to the covenant-breaking people of Judah and Israel. Similar to "a gentle lamb led to the slaughter," the prophet is to be destroyed like a tree with its fruit removed. Jeremiah may well serve as a helpful companion and co-conspirator for preachers tasked with speaking messages of truth to those not ready to receive or willing to hear. Even though Jeremiah shows a bit of vengeful anger when he says, "Let me see your retribution upon them," he recognizes God's identity as the one who judges righteously.

Preaching James

The author of James continues his moral teaching with a discussion of wisdom. He identifies a difference between works done out of gentle wisdom and those born out of envy and selfish ambition. As we move closer into political campaign seasons, a wise preacher could wonder out loud about what wise leadership looks like. In a world of corruption and mistrust, who can we lift up as examples of servant leaders? In a world of violence and conflict, how is peacemaking taking root in your communities?

Sometimes seeing another language brings out helpful points in the biblical text. In English, we make two words for what Spanish, and the original Greek, have as just one. Sometimes we translate the same word as "righteousness" and other times as "justice." In Spanish, we use *justicia* for both. That makes a difference. Righteousness sounds so individual and personal. A righteous person does, believes, and thinks the right thing. Justice, on the other hand is more communal, more collective. When the Bible talks about justice, it's about how society treats people often marginalized: orphans, widows, and immigrants. Imagine if every time we see the word "righteous" or "righteousness," we replace it with "just" or "justice," respectively. Our preaching and teaching would have a different feel. An emphasis on justice instead of righteousness would have a more communal and corporate feel, rather than emphasizing some sort of individual piety and practice.

Thinking then of James' phrase in 3:18, "a harvest of righteousness," what seeds of justice and righteousness are germinating in your congregation? What often-obscured voices are being lifted up? How are those who serve growing in leadership? How are those who lead growing in service?

Preaching Mark

Jesus speaks of transformation and reversal. In Mark 9:18, he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This text could be a serendipitous chance to recognize and celebrate ministries in your congregation and community that help others. Who gets their hands dirty in a community garden? Who assists other families to have healthy meals? Who has served you when you least expected it?

On the other hand, Jesus' words about servanthood give us the opportunity to seriously and thoughtfully evaluate our ministries of assistance and help. Do these ministries really help hurting people, or do they just make us feel good about ourselves? Do our home-repair projects on mission trips take jobs away from local contractors? Does the generosity of a wealthy parish deny its mission partner congregation the opportunity to develop its own practices of stewardship? Are our mission teams just colonialism in disguise? These are important questions for preachers to ponder as we encounter Jesus' invitation to servanthood, lest we inadvertently neglect doing justice to God's reign of justice.

Paul Bailie

Lectionary 26/Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 27, 2015

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29
Psalm 19:7–14
James 5:13–20
Mark 9:38–50

Engaging the Text

The book of Numbers would be more accurately titled "In the Wilderness"—the literal translation from the Hebrew title, *BeMidBar*2. God's people are smack dab in the middle of the wilderness experience. Now 600,000 in number, they are receiving daily manna from God that must be gathered each morning, boiled and baked for sustenance. The people of God are bored—bored with the menu, wishing for the bounty and variety they

2. Wilda Gafney, "Introduction to Numbers," *The Peoples' Bible (NRSV),* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

"remember" about their life in Egypt, and complaining loudly.

Moses is just plain tired. He complains to God that these people are NOT those to whom he gave birth, and he's not equipped to nurse them as God is able. "I didn't ask for this job," would be Moses' words today.

Long story short, God tells Moses to appoint seventy leaders to help him manage the task of this wandering people. This text may be of more importance to the preacher than to the congregation, whether for commiseration or a reminder to delegate.

This is the last week to hear a reading from James in this lectionary cycle. The author lifts up the role of prayer in community life—"the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (verse 16b). What if Moses' prayer of complaint were the words for which the Lord was waiting? Is God able to act in and through prayer best when we raise our hands and admit we cannot do it (whatever "it" may be) on our own?

This prayer of Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman comes to mind:[3]

My ego is like a fortress
I have built its walls stone by stone
To hold out the invasion of the
love of God

But I have stayed here long
enough. There is light
Over the barriers. O my God—
The darkness of my house forgive
And overtake my soul.
I relax the barriers.
I abandon all that I think I am,
All that I hope to be,
All that I believe I possess.
I withdraw my grasping hand
from the future,
And in the great silence of this
moment,
I alertly rest my soul.

As a sea gull lays in the wind current,
So I lay myself into the Spirit of
God.
My dearest human relationships,
My most precious dreams,
I surrender to his care.

All that I have called my own I
give back.
All my favorite things
Which I would withhold in my
storehouse
From his fearful tyranny,
I let go.
I give myself
Unto thee O my God. Amen.

Jesus takes on what he sees in his disciples, and what human beings continue to do in our time: finger-pointing and rule tracking. Our good intentions, when heard by uninformed bystanders, have negative consequences for the kingdom of God.

Pastoral Reflection
Mark 9:38–50

The church has attracted many who are good rule followers. Even within a denomination that teaches that God chooses us first, we often find our pews—and our pulpits—filled with those who seem to live as if salvation is found in keeping the rules. I claim this sin in myself, freely proclaiming God's grace and mercy, and then beating myself up for how I have failed to be perfect in keeping "the rules."

3. Lyn Klug, *All Will Be Well:A Gathering of Healing Prayers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 1998).

Rule-following has its place in order-keeping, a phrase that often creeps into my lexicon as a pastor. Good order can be a blessing for the church—to have checks and balances in place to be fair and just employers and wise stewards of gifts received, to provide a place that is safe for the vulnerable, and to offer Word and Sacrament ministry with regularity and reverence.

Our most well-intentioned rule-keeping can have unseen consequences for the newcomer and the uninitiated.

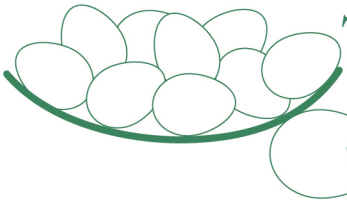
Growing up in a rural, Germanic-heritage, Lutheran family, I grew up in a box with high walls that were kept quite tight. There were expectations of how to dress for church, where to sit, and how to behave in those beautiful, hard oak pews in perfectly straight rows. I was able to flourish under such restriction, as we were also a singing, joyful, and generous church.

I realize now that our high walls and rules kept people from entering or joining our church. People who were not of our same heritage, who didn't know the rules about how to dress and act in church—or how to park in the unmarked lot—couldn't find their way in.

My adult nephew will soon move back to our hometown but will not join the church of our childhood. His young family has become more accustomed to the church they joined in the city, where the rules and expectations are communicated in a more casual way, one that is more child-friendly and tolerant. It will be hard for the people of our home church to understand their decision. It is my fear that these people of God will choose to remain high-order rule keepers rather than consider what they might change to include my nephew's family.

Rule-keeping can be exhausting, and often offends others who are not initiated in the system. Jesus so rarely listed rules beyond "Love God. Love your Neighbor." Can we learn to separate our concern with good order from following Jesus and being salt that gives life to the world?

Bonnie Wilcox



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