

DIOCESE OF EAU CLAIRE
Deacons' School
Class of 2013-14

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR DISCERNMENT COMMITTEES

The Rev'd Dn Jo K. Glasser
October 15, 2013

I. Discernment

Discernment is the term given to the process of sorting out or coming to a decision on a course of action; in this case, a ministry. The Church has historically implemented the process of discernment in community, so that an individual's sense of call can be validated by respected lay members of their faith family, and to provide a support structure for the individual as s/he progresses through the discernment and formation process in preparation for a new ministry. The canons of the Episcopal Church require the involvement of the rector or priest in charge and vestry of the discerning individual's congregation, and a parish discernment committee comprised of people in the congregation and others knowledgeable of the individual's gifts, capacities, and areas for growth. Discernment committee members are expected to pray for clarity of call and for God's blessing on the individual engaged in the discernment process, and to participate in a series of meetings with other committee members and the discerning person.

The purpose of the discernment committee is to help answer two fundamental discernment questions:

- (1) "Is this person called to be a member of the ordained clergy, or called to serve God and His Church as a lay person?" and
- (2) "If this person is called to be ordained, is s/he called to be a priest or a deacon?"

Answering both of these questions requires in-depth and sometimes difficult introspection and reflection. The parish discernment committee helps to answer these questions by articulating what they have observed about the person's qualities, characteristics, and gifts, and comparing those to the nature and demands of diaconal ministry. This article is intended to provide some basic description and background on the diaconate, for discernment committee members to use as they work with the potential candidate to address the key questions.

The call to ordained ministry, whether as a deacon or a priest, is a call to be set apart or called out for a new identity in the Body of Christ. The Church teaches that every Christian is called, through his or her baptismal covenant, into the service of God by following Christ (see Ordination liturgy for Deacons, p. 543, *Book of Common Prayer*, and Catechism, *BCP* pp. 855-856). Ordained clergy in the Church carry the additional responsibility of representing Christ and his Church (see Catechism, *BCP* p. 856).

The deacon's identity is that of a servant while the priest's identity is that of a pastor and teacher. Otherwise stated, the deacon is called to service while the priest is called to sacrament:

The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God. (*BCP* pp. 531, 543)

II. Foundations of the Diaconate

In Acts 6:1-6 we find the account of the selection of the first deacons. The office of deacon was created very early in the life of the church, to fulfill the need for people who would commit to a life of service, following the example set by Christ himself. The first deacons were to serve the practical needs of the people, such as the equitable distribution of food to the community, while the apostles concentrated on “prayer, and ... the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:4)

The role of deacon arose from an unmet need in the community of early Christians. Greek-speaking disciples were concerned that their poor and widows were not receiving a fair share of the distribution of food in comparison to those who were Jewish. The apostles called together the entire community and asked them to select “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” (Acts 6:3) who were appointed to oversee the distribution. Faithful to the origin of the order, deacons today are still nominated and supported by their congregations, and given a special charge to attend to the needs of the poor and marginalized, both within and outside the church.

In the Greek world of commerce, *diakonos* referred to an agent or intermediary who acted or spoke on behalf of a superior. Early Christian deacons served as agents of the bishop, with responsibility for the oversight of charity. The deacons’ role in the worship of the early church included preparing the table for the Eucharist, placing on it the bread and wine, and receiving and presenting the people’s offerings, much as we see deacons doing at worship today.

The word “deacon,” as a translation of the Greek *diakonos*, appears infrequently in the New Testament. *Diakonos* is more often translated “minister” or “servant.” Individual deacons are mentioned in letters to the Philippians, the Romans, Philemon, Timothy, and Titus. The ministry and liturgical roles of deacons are also described in other Christian writings of the first and second centuries, referring to the deacon as an officer and servant of the church. There were both male and female deacons as early as the mid-first century: Paul commends “our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae” (Rom. 16:1) to the Christians of Rome, because she is apparently due to arrive there on an official diaconal visit.

The first deacons were commissioned much as deacons are ordained today: “They had [them] stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.” (Acts 6:6) Today the Bishop, as successor of the apostles, prays for the new deacons and lays hands on them.

III. The Deacon’s Call in the Church

The clearest example of the deacon’s role in the church is found in the functions of the deacon in the liturgy. The deacon’s role in the liturgy, indeed, in all facets of the life of the congregation, is to represent the needs of the world to the church and to call the church to respond to those needs (see *BCP* p. 543). According to Rosalind Brown, “Deacons are there to ensure that worship is both heavenly and earthly, ... to open people’s eyes to the *endless* possibilities for worship to affect the way we live, and thus to be expressed in the hundreds of different places in which the congregation

end up during the week before being summed up again in the liturgy when the church next gathers in one place.” (*Being a Deacon Today*, 2005, p. 48) Notice the words used when the deacon dismisses the congregation at the end of the liturgy (*BCP* p. 366):

Deacon: Let us go forth in the name of Christ.

-or-

Deacon: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

-or-

Deacon: Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

-or-

Deacon: Let us bless the Lord.

People: *Thanks be to God.*

The active language of the dismissal (“going forth”, “loving and serving”, and “rejoicing in ... power”) says nothing about returning home to quietly wait through another week until the time comes for the congregation to gather again. Worshippers are dismissed from worship with a call to action in the world. Notice also that the call is in the first person plural: “Let *us* go forth.” All are included because all are called to serve.

The deacon is responsible for three primary functions in the first part of the service of Holy Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Word: proclaiming the Gospel, leading or introducing the Prayers of the People, and calling the people to Confession. The deacon may also bring the gospel book to the celebration in the opening procession. This is a reminder of the days of persecution of the early church, when the deacons were entrusted with taking the gospel scrolls home for safe keeping. Some of those early deacons were punished by imprisonment or death for the possession of the gospel. The deacon’s part in worship fosters continuity and accountability in the church’s life as Rosalind Brown describes: “The deacon who calls us to confession is the deacon who last week sent us out into the world to proclaim the gospel and who knows that we have inevitably slipped up in the course of doing that, and so now invites us to confess together ... In leading the intercessions the deacon brings the needs of the world before the church for prayer, and then leads the church in prayer which scoops up all aspects of life before God.” (*Being a Deacon Today*, p. 54)

As the second part of the Eucharist Liturgy, the Holy Communion, begins, the deacon prepares the altar during the Offertory. The deacon then receives the people’s financial gifts, another reminder of the early days when deacons oversaw the collection and distribution of material assistance to those in need. During the Holy Communion the deacon stands beside the celebrant, to assure that all that is needed is in its proper place at the proper time. The deacon may distribute bread or wine when the people commune, and after communion the deacon performs the ceremonial washing of the communion vessels called the ablutions.

Even the vestments traditionally worn by deacons are symbolic of service: “The traditional diaconal vestment, the dalmatic ... and the positioning of the deacon’s stole over one shoulder and tied out of the way under the other arm, signal the deacon’s readiness to serve. The fact that a vested minister is dressed to serve is a visible reminder to the church of its own diaconal ministry, following in the footsteps of Christ. The ministry of the deacon in the Eucharistic liturgy is essentially a practical ministry of care, compassion and proclamation and should therefore be all of a piece with the deacon’s ministry during the rest of the week.” (*Being a Deacon Today*, p. 53)

The second central aspect of the diaconal vocation is prayer. Prayer may be either private or public, and the deacon is expected to practice both. The deacon's Rule of Life should include praying the Daily Office daily, either in public or in private. A disciplined, faithful prayer life is essential. Rosalind Brown says, "There has to be a scaffolding or framework of prayer in place that can bear the weight to be placed upon it... If we are honest, most of us find prayer does not always come naturally, so discipline is needed." (*Being a Deacon Today*, p. 88)

The deacon is also called upon to be in prayer on behalf of others, and to help people to pray themselves. Sometimes this is a matter of exposure to or training in different methods of prayer; sometimes it requires guidance in self-examination to identify barriers to prayer; and sometimes it may be most useful to pray with people to help them get started or to get past a rough spot.

The deacon's relationship to other ordained clergy is often a source of confusion, perhaps because it does not correspond well with a more familiar hierarchy of reporting relationships. The deacon's ministry is "directly under [her] bishop" (*BCP* p. 543), and it is a ministry of servanthood of all people, "particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely." (*BCP* p. 543). Deacons are assigned by the bishop to function under the direction of local clergy leaders. In congregations served by deacons the rector or priest-in-charge may request that the deacon be involved in or lead various forms of pastoral ministry.

One such pastoral ministry is catechesis: instruction in preparation for baptism and/or confirmation. Rosalind Brown refers to this process as "helping people find their way into church" and further states that catechesis "could well include baptism preparation, marriage preparation, inquirers' groups and work with children as they grow in the faith." (*Being a Deacon Today*, p. 75) The deacon may exercise leadership or work collaboratively with other clergy and lay leaders in programs for Christian formation and renewal, such as Cursillo, Faith Alive, and Christian education. Lay ministers such as Eucharistic Ministers and Visitors and Worship Leaders are frequently trained and supervised by deacons.

Depending on their skills and oftentimes their time constraints, deacons may participate in visiting the sick or homebound. Deacons may anoint the sick, hear confessions and offer assurance of absolution, and administer Holy Communion from the reserved sacrament (with express permission of the Bishop) if a priest is not available. Both formation and pastoral ministry are always intimately intertwined with personal study and prayer. As Rosalind Brown (2005) states, "Scripture and life are in dialogue, the deacon's life is an articulation of Scripture that others can read." (p. 81) The words of St. Francis of Assisi also come to mind: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." This is why the Bishop asks during the ordination liturgy, "Will you be faithful in prayer, and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures?" and the deacon replies, "I will." (*BCP* p. 544)

IV. The Deacon's Call in the World

The common question, "What are deacons able to *do*?" most often relates to the deacon's functions in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and other services of corporate worship. While this is a legitimate question, it may be more helpful for the discernment process to explore the role of the deacon in the church at work rather than at worship.

The deacon always bears in mind the words of Jesus, who told us that we would be serving him if we provided for the everyday practical needs of food, drink, clothing, care, companionship and

hospitality of “one the least of these who are members of my family” (Mt 25:40). The deacon is particularly attentive to the needs of the poor and marginalized. Jesus also said, “you always have the poor with you” (Mt 26:14; also Mk 14:7 and Jn 12:8), so we know that there is no shortage of poverty for deacons to address. Some deacons minister in community settings such as food pantries, crisis centers or homeless shelters. Others work as hospital, hospice or nursing home chaplains, and still others work in jail or prison ministry or with organizations that advocate for the disenfranchised. Deacons are frequently found joining others in the community to work collaboratively in the arena of peace and justice.

Deacons bring the presence of the church into the brokenness of the world. Pastoral compassion is the impetus for the Body of Christ to take action to reduce human suffering and to bring the good news of the gospel. Pastoral care is part of the public ministry of the church. Walking alongside people in pain or distress brings us face-to-face with God, often raising the difficult question: Why must people suffer from poverty, loneliness, confusion, grief, and oppression in its many forms? Deacons don’t bring answers, but they offer compassionate presence following the model of our Lord himself. “[He] lived, ate, slept, traveled, laughed and cried with his disciples for three years, ... spent thirty years before that with his family in their village, ... endured Roman rule with them, ... knew first hand about the suffering of old age, death in childbirth, childhood accidents that crippled for life.” (Rosalind Brown, *Being a Deacon Today*, p. 64)

As well as providing pastoral care themselves, deacons prepare and support lay people in their pastoral ministries. The essence of pastoral care, whether it is provided by an ordained minister or a lay person, is hope. Grounded in the conviction that the all-powerful God who created us is also the all-loving God who saves us, the many pastoral caregivers in the church, both lay and ordained, are strengthened and supported for ministry.

V. Formation

Formation is the term for a process of being shaped or prepared for a role in ministry. It’s difficult to tell where discernment ends and formation begins, because both are ongoing, lifelong processes for all Christians. We continually seek to come closer to what God intends us to be, and that involves sorting through options and pathways, and being open to the guidance of the Spirit and other teachers along the way. The formal process of formation for the vocational diaconate in the Diocese of Eau Claire is approximately two years, from the time that the congregation nominates a potential diaconal candidate until ordination.

Formation, like discernment, is done in community whenever possible. That means that candidates have a peer group who study the same material and complete the same assignments in the course of engaging with similar questions. A formation community offers many gifts, among which three are particularly notable: people with whom one can share struggles; people who can broaden one’s perspective; and people who can disagree in love.

A community of candidates preparing for ordination to Holy Orders, or for leadership in lay ministry, has the opportunity to develop sturdy interpersonal bonds, as they grow together in understanding and in faith. Jesus himself used the same training model, calling a group of twelve men who learned together from him, and supported each other through their apprenticeship and ministries. Candidates in formation share at the heart level. Community that is created from this depth of common experience lasts beyond the conclusion of formal training. To support ongoing peer

support and fellowship, church canons require that each Episcopal diocese have a council of deacons that meets on a regular basis. In some dioceses, including the Diocese of Eau Claire, deacons are included with the priests in clergy development opportunities.

Members of formation communities remind each other that there is not only one reality or only setting in which ministry happens. By learning about the daily circumstances of other members of the community all of the members benefit from a broader perspective on the vast range of opportunities that ministry encompasses. Perhaps the greatest gift of community is a loving and safe place in which to disagree. It's highly unlikely that any group of two or more people would agree on everything; therefore the mark of a close-knit community is not whether there is agreement, but whether disagreement is handled with love. In a community that can disagree in love, everyone becomes more understanding because it is safe to explore viewpoints other than one's own. The community itself is strengthened by the experience of working through disagreement with respect and genuine caring for the integrity of all involved. There are precious few communities in life where the members care enough about each other to disagree in love.

So, at the center of community is love – an extension of God's love for us and for all of His creation expressed in His Son, Jesus Christ. Love is the motivating force that calls each of us to our ministry, and it is the sustaining force that maintains our efforts when we are faced with disappointments, frustrations, or simply fatigue. Many times community is the conduit for the motivating and sustaining love of God. Gratefully, God's love is far more patient than human love, but it is also an insistent kind of love that demands a response. Rosalind Brown (*Being a Deacon Today*, 2005) reminds us that at the deacon's ordination, s/he is charged by the Bishop, "... to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship." (BCP, p. 543) That is deacon's work.