

Seeing the Deacon in Our Midst: An Aid for the Discerning Community

Roderick B. Dugliss, Dean ~ The School for Deacons, Diocese of California

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I am convinced that there are at least two deacons in every congregation who do not yet know that they are called to this. It is the delightful and diligent task of all the people to look for them and call them by name.

What is discernment?

For many years it has been the practice of The Episcopal Church to rely on self-nomination to identify those who are, or may be, called to ordained leadership. We are used to waiting for someone to say, 'I think God is calling me to be a deacon.' Today we are working to encourage the community of faith to be the initiator of the process of call. We hope that everyone in a congregation will continually look around to see if there is a prospective deacon in their midst and be emboldened to approach such a person and ask, 'Do you think you might be called . . .?' This isn't either/or since God is not limited to acting just through individuals or only through the congregation. A person's own sense of call needs to be honored, but most importantly, it needs to be seen, corroborated, and affirmed by others in the local community of faith and in the wider church. In the same way, the perceptions of the people about a prospective deacon need to be sensed, prayed into, and owned by the individual. Discernment is an ever-present, on going vocation of the gathered people of God.

How do we discern?

This brochure seeks to help us, as people of faith, to undertake our vocation of discernment. It lays out some basic understandings, resources, and processes for looking for deacons in our congregations. You can use this brochure for your individual discerning or as a resource for your congregation as it learns to be a discerning community.

What assumptions do we start with?

All Christian ministry arises out of Baptism. It is spelled out in our Baptismal Covenant.

Gifts for ministry are lavished on us through the Holy Spirit to be used in living out our stated mission: to restore all people to God and to each other in Christ. Everyone is called to be holy, to make Jesus Christ and his loving Good News known, to nurture one another in faith, to serve, to own and promote the vision of the Holy Reign of God and to build up the Body of Christ. Some among us are called to provide ordained forms of leadership to help all of us to claim and live out our Baptism.

The Diaconate is a full and equal order of ministry in the church with distinct responsibilities and leadership roles.

All are called to active discernment. The ministry canons of The Episcopal Church [Title III] adopted at the 74th General Convention (August 2003) charge all people and congregations to make and active, on-going effort to discern, call out, and support the formation of persons for all kinds of ministry in the church, including deacons.

What are the first steps?

Learn about the Diaconate—

- 1) Read the section of: ‘An Outline of the Faith commonly called the Catechism’ on The Ministry, *Book of Common Prayer* pp. 855-856.
- 2) Review your Baptismal Covenant, *Book of Common Prayer* pp. 304-305.
- 3) Read “The Examination” in The Rite of Ordination of a Deacon *Book of Common Prayer* p. 543.
- 4) Read the Canons of The Episcopal Church, Title III, Number 6 ‘The Ordination of Deacons’, and Number 7 ‘The Life and Ministry of Deacons.’ You can find this text a The Episcopal Church web site: [www. episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org).
- 5) Talk to two or more deacons. Diaconal ministry has varied enough expressions that you need to hear from several perspectives.

Read the standard texts:

Ormond Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*, 2nd Edn. Cowley Press. This is readable, clear, and well researched.

Susanne Watson-Epting, *Unexpected Outcomes: The Diaconate Renewed*, Morehouse Publishing, 2015. This is the most up-to-date resource on the diaconate in The Episcopal Church. She builds on the work of Plater (above) using his metaphor of ‘waves’ to describe stages of growth and development of the diaconate from the early 19th century to the present. It helps us all understand the varieties of diaconal expression we can encounter in discernment.

James Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*, 2nd Edn. Trinity Press. A full history of the diaconate, with lots of detail from the early church and the Middle Ages. It is less helpful on the diaconate in the current period of renewal.

John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making the Connection Between the New and Old*, Morehouse Publishing. This slim volume draws on a larger body of work Collins has undertaken in probing the fuller meaning of the Greek words with the stem *daikon-* of which *diakonia*, traditionally translated as ‘service’ is a key one. By referring to secular word usage to enlarge our understanding of sacred text he recovers for us a dimension of diaconal ministry that is ‘agency,’ intermediation, and advocacy.

Thomas E. Breidenthal, ‘Exodus from Privilege: Reflections on the Book of Acts,’ *The Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2. In this provocative essay, the Bishop of Southern Ohio points out how a fuller understanding of *diakonia* reframes our understanding of all Orders, and the mission and ministry of the church.

How do we begin to look?

When you begin looking for the deacon(s) in the midst of your congregation it is very important to note that you will not see persons fully formed and realized as deacons. An intentional process of formation and development will be essential in order to fulfill the promise of the deacon within them. Only then does the church ordain them. The School for Deacons meets the church’s requirement for formation and development.

You are looking for inclinations toward diaconal ministry and the potential for leadership in ministry in a person that can be called forward in preparation for ordination.

Bear in mind that a potential deacon is an active participant in the life of a congregation; a person who is regular in weekly worship and in ‘working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.’ Canons Title I, No. 17, Sec. 3.

Once you have done your background work, several images or metaphors for the deacon will help your discernment.

Begin to look for:

The Deacon as Servant

This is not someone who is servile! It is servanthood as proclaimed by Jesus who ‘came not to be served but to serve.’ This is servanthood modeled by a Jesus who took towel and bowl to wash the feet of those he challenged to follow him. A servant instinctively reaches out to the other.

The Deacon as Servant Leader

We all promise to ‘seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving neighbor as self.’ Deacons have the willingness and skills to guide, direct, coax, and coach all of us both in both seeking (and seeing) Christ where we may not want to or be able to. The deacon then invites and supports us in our serving. Deacons don’t, and can’t, do it all themselves. They lead us all so that the world is served in Christ and in the name of Christ.

The Deacon as Icon of Service

Deacons have a limited yet powerful role in liturgy where they act out for the congregation in symbolic ways the concrete ministry of service in action. Each element of the deacon in liturgy links to or expresses an element of *diakonia* as a reminder and an inspiration to a gathered congregation. We look, then, for persons who can inhabit this role with confidence and competence as they proclaim the Good News for the world on our behalf, help us pray for the world’s deepest needs, model hospitality and welcome in setting a table for the feast, and standing in the doorway to dismiss us ‘to do the work God has given us to do.’

Deacon as Animator

We look for people who cheerfully cajole, inspire, invite, support, encourage, celebrate, and sustain the impulses to ministry in and of all the people of a congregation.

Deacon as Advocate

We look for people who can and do speak up for those who have no voice, no agency and who go unheard. We look for people who can articulate the Good News both for us in the faith community and for those with whom we seek to ally outside the church to engage in compassionate action and ministries of justice.

Deacon as Entrepreneur

We look for people who can see an unmet need in a hurting and unjust world and can marshal the resources and the people to respond to it. We look for people who can start up ministry by initiating, innovating, and then delegating so that God’s people carry on, grow, and expand what was started.

Deacon as Prophet

The heart of the deacons' ministry is compassion and justice. The prophet sees the gap between what is and what God wishes for us and calls us to see it and act. The prophetic deacon is not partisan, strident, nor offensive but rather compassionate, clear, and insistent. We look for people who can speak Good News as a call to act for reconciliation, recompense, and restoration.

Deacon as Interpreter

The ordination rite enjoins the deacon 'to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.' (emphasis supplied) We look for persons who are drawn to represent to us the situations of the last, the least, the lost, and to invite us as community to respond to the causes of privation, oppression, and marginalization.

And to repeat . . .

It is important to remember that in all of this discernment we are looking for signs and hints of possibility, not perfected saints. And, no one deacon will embody all these traits.

The Heart of a Deacon

A prospective deacon:

- will be a member of a congregation in the diocese
- will show evidence of diaconal gifts, already lead people in diaconal ministry, and have a clear sense of diaconal vocation as the guiding principle of her/his life.

We look for Baptized persons who are

- Disciple Formed
- Gospel Centered
- Mission Driven

And who passionately

- Find Christ in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned
- Lead Christian people in loving care of the poor, sick, lonely, and needy
- Defend those who have no helper

Visit The School for Deacons web site at www.sfd.edu

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