

John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church. Making connections between old and new* (Leicester: Gracewing / Harrisburg PA: Morehouse Publishing , 2002) ISBN 0-85244 554 7 (UK) 0 8192 1933 9 (US), p/b, pp ix + 158, RRP \$34.95

For such a time as this. A renewed diaconate in the Church of England (London: Church House Publishing, 2001) ISBN 0 7151 5764 7, p/b, pp viii + 70 RRP £5.95

Melbourne scholar John Collins has been working away at *diakonia* and deacons for some 25 years. His work began as a doctoral topic, chosen for its intrinsic interest to a researcher in early Christian origins. But it tapped a critical source for reflection on Christian ministry, and flung out radical challenges to cherished assumptions – not least among deacons. This, his latest book, engages these assumptions, and in so doing offers significant insights: all concerned with the patterns and meanings of Christian ministry today need to take full note of his arguments.

Renewal of the diaconate has had ‘service’, especially of the poor, as its keynote for 150 years. Collins’ work, initially made public in his magisterial *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (OUP 1990), challenges this line of thinking. His research, grounded in a painstaking survey of the usage and meaning of *diakon-* in the Graeco-Roman world, demonstrates that ‘commissioned agency’, especially for a ‘sacred mission’, lies at its heart. ‘Service’ is the duty of every Christian, rather than the essence of a particular ministry. The roots of this latter idea lie in European Christians’ profound responses to the dark side of industrialization. Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike created or revived a variety of ‘diaconal’ ministries. ‘Service’ raises problems: it can foster the polarization of evangelism and social concern (whether caring or advocacy), and with ‘servants’ now unknown in western societies, ‘service’ primarily refers to ‘service industries’.

The past 25 years has seen many church reports about deacons, voicing the desire to reshape churches for mission in post-Christendom contexts. The Church of England has issued three. A 1974 report, dominated by the 60s ‘social service’ ethos, recommended abolition of the order – not acted upon! A 1988 report took a more positive line, but did not prompt much action. The 1996 Anglican – Lutheran *Hanover Report* made reference to Collins, but remained within the ‘service’ frame.

For such a time as this, the Church of England’s most recent report on the diaconate, however, is very different. It takes Collins’ work on board fully, integrating it into profound reflections on ministry generally (despite an inaccurate picture of the situation in the Anglican Church of Australia). The report makes far-reaching recommendations for the English situation. If taken up – unlikely, since the 2001 November General Synod basically shelved it – these would greatly assist not only the Church of England in pursuing Christ’s mission in a post-Christendom environment, but many other churches who are inspired by, and / or struggle with, the egalitarian spirit of the age.

Interestingly, Collins and *For such a time as this* cross-refer to one another: the latter takes Collins' 1990 and 1992 books into account, while Collins sees this English report as the first to take his work seriously. Collins acknowledges that his debunking of 'service' may disturb many, not least deacons. But his new book has the primary aim of helping deacons (and others) gain insight into their calling – or, as he would put it, their being 'agents' commissioned by Christ for the sacred mission of conserving and handing on the Word of God.

Collins' chapters come in an unusual order: the first debunks much debate about deacons since 1990, but does not disclose his positive teaching. A long second chapter takes up several 'classic texts': Mark 10.45, Acts 6.1-6, Romans 16.1 in particular. The outcome is a rich and satisfying exposition which, if it distances these passages from the deacon's office as such, deepens our understanding of the divine 'service' to which they testify. Chapter Three considers afresh the evidence of the New Testament and early tradition about the office of deacon, showing its strongly missional character, and the close relation of deacons to church and bishop: it is no 'lone ranger' or 'secular' ministry. The final chapter brings the earlier chapters together, before sketching implications for today's churches – and returning to the 2001 English report to applaud its direction. A helpful bibliography, and name and text indices, round out the book.

Between them, these two works – which make a reader's task as easy as the subject matter allows – are highly significant for the practice and understanding of Christian ministry today. They challenge all churches to look afresh at the deacon's office, and at the diaconal – i.e. 'commissioned for mission' – dimension of all ministry. They offer profound implications for ecumenical work, sparking new insights into the 'one ministry' versus 'threefold order' debate, of particular significance in Anglican – Lutheran relations but of wider import.

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