

The diaconal church

Servant leadership

Every member of the diaconal church is potentially a leader, some within the church as an institution, others when it takes the form of a movement. All are called upon to exercise servant leadership.

However, the diaconal church recognizes that certain of its members are called to the three-fold order of ordained ministry as a tried and tested aspect of its Christian legacy. Because the titles of ‘presbyter’, ‘deacon’ and ‘bishop’ have changed in meaning down the centuries, the diaconal church continues to re-appraise the nature of these forms of ordained leadership in the light of the needs of today’s world. In what follows, I retain the titles of the church’s traditional three-fold order but identify some of the radical changes which the emergence of a diaconal church now makes imperative.

Within the diaconal church the three ordained forms of leadership are ‘full and equal orders’, as James Barnett once put it. Leadership also remains collaborative. The working together of all those ordained to leadership, as well as in partnership with lay people, is imperative. Forms of collaboration will vary according to the circumstances, but all will essentially be different forms of team ministry.

Presbyters as ‘an order of continuity’

I use the term ‘presbyter’ to indicate those traditionally described as ordained ‘to the ministry of Word and Sacrament’. ‘Priest’ is the alternative title in most pre-Reformation churches. The ministry of the presbyter remains of fundamental importance in supporting and sustaining the life and work of the diaconal church *as institution*. This means a radical re-orientation of their ministry.

Within the diaconal church, the presbyter is the main custodian of the West’s Christian heritage, notably of its theology of the kingdom as a community and its implications for ministry and mission in today’s world. This requires that the presbyter understands how that legacy has informed or failed to inform the life of the church down the centuries.

The responsibility of the presbyter in the diaconal church is to help the people of God to own, affirm, celebrate and make manifest within their own lives the gifts of the kingdom community, and the Trinity as their source. The presbyter is also concerned that the gathered church exemplifies what it means to be the servant of the kingdom community through worship, learning, pastoral care and mission within the local area. The presbyter undertakes this task by exercising and exemplifying the role of servant leader.

The roles of the presbyter as servant leader - visionary, strategist, catalyst, intermediary, enabler, educator and partner – are focused on the life and work of the gathered church. The roles of visionary and catalyst are concerned with enabling the people of God to be inspired by and eager to make the vision of their church as a microcosm of the kingdom community a reality. The presbyter as strategist seeks out ways and means by which that undertaking can best be accomplished in the context of the situation and character of the congregation concerned.

As an enabler, the presbyter is responsible for nurturing and empowering the people of God for their ministry through affirmation of their abilities, encouragement of their endeavours and pastoral care. The presbyter's role as educator is concerned with encouraging and furthering the people of God's journey of discovery in the Christian faith, one especially focused on the nature and meaning of the gifts of the kingdom community – life, liberation, love, learning and servant leadership - and their implications for ministry in church and society.

The presbyter as partner is concerned to further ecumenical links with other churches and those agencies in the locality which are seeking to make manifest, consciously or not, the gifts of the kingdom community.

An 'order of continuity'

Within the diaconal church as institution, I identify presbyters as '*an order of continuity*'. Such a calling is far more significant than that of 'maintenance'. It is not about preserving past ways of being church for the sake of survival. It is a commission to discover new ways of discerning, accessing, celebrating, employing, and exploring further the kingdom community and its gifts, in order to enrich the lives and empower the ministry of the people of God in today's world.

Being an order of continuity in no way excludes presbyters from being engaged in mission. Their contribution is 'to grow' and develop the church as a community of place through endeavours such as 'church planting' wherever necessary and feasible.

Because the experience, knowledge and skills required to fulfil this role are multiple, the presbyter will inevitably require the support, experience and skills of others, lay and ordained. Presbyters will, therefore, normally find themselves involved in team ministries, though frequently as team leaders.

Overview

Presbyters, *as an order of continuity*, have the privileged and vital task of ensuring that the diaconal church as institution preserves, celebrates and continues to build on its Christian heritage, embodied in the kingdom community and its gifts. The presbyter's role is to ensure that the medium, the gathered community as a key part of the institutional church, is the message. This means making certain that the diaconal church's worship, education, pastoral care, and its mission reflect its commission to be the servant of the kingdom community.

Deacons as 'an order of transformation'

A glimpse of diaconal history

In the early church, the diaconate played an important part in leadership, exercising liturgical, educational, administrative and pastoral roles, often closely associated with the office of bishop. It was only after the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) that presbyteral ministry came to dominate that of the diaconate. 'By the later medieval era the Latin or Roman rite had relegated the diaconate to a stepping-stone to the priesthood, which effectively marginalized the order for a thousand years', writes Michael Jackson.¹

¹ Jackson, M. (2022) 'The Diaconate in the Anglican and Luther Traditions: an Anglican Perspective' in *Consensus*. Vol. 43. Issue 1.

However, from the early nineteenth century onwards, and especially in the West, the diaconate has developed in a wide diversity of ways.² Jackson describes the current situation as follows³:

At one end of the spectrum would be the deacon as a liturgical functionary; at the other end, the deacon as an ecclesiastical social worker. The Eastern rites would be at the liturgical end of the spectrum, followed by the Roman Catholics; the Reformed Churches would be at the social work end, followed by the Lutherans. As usual, Anglicans would be somewhere in the middle!

Thus, today, we have one of the three historic orders of the church still searching for a clear role relevant to the current needs of both world and church.

A distinctive diaconate

I use the term ‘deacon’ to indicate those who currently bear this title as ‘distinctive’ deacons, that is those who are commissioned or ordained to a distinctive life-long office within the church. It is my contention that such a renewed ‘distinctive diaconate’⁴ is now of fundamental importance if the diaconal church *as movement* is to fulfil its vital ministry of communal transformation in society and world. However, the issue of the so-called ‘transitional diaconate’ needs to be addressed first.

Michael Jackson reminds us that the transitional diaconate is ‘typical of the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Eastern traditions – [being] the passage through the order of deacons [taken] for a year, more or less, [by] those to be ordained presbyter or priest.’⁵ This form of ‘sequential,’ and, later, ‘cumulative’ ordination (the idea that ‘inside some deacons there is a priest, and inside some priests there is a bishop’, as Rosalind Brown puts it⁶), became common practice in the church from the fifth century onwards. Clearly, the concept of a transitional diaconate entrenches the assumption that the distinctive diaconate is ‘an inferior office.’

Within the diaconal church, any prolongation of a transitional diaconate would be a hindrance to the emergence of a distinctive *and* renewed diaconate. Alison Peden puts her finger on the issue when she writes that ‘ordaining priests to the transitional diaconate is a challenge to the vocational integrity of deacons and their ordination. To spend months and even years carefully discerning a call to be deacon, a herald of the kingdom and a commissioned agent of the Church’s mission, and then watch ordination to the diaconate being used as a stepping-stone rite for those without that vocation diminishes a role that God has created’.⁷ She goes on to argue that ‘as disciples and as ordinands, candidates should be directly ordained to either the diaconate or the priesthood as and when the Church is satisfied that they can respond to its call with integrity and competence’⁸.

Towards a renewed diaconate

² Jackson, M. (ed.) (2019) *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice*. Durham: Sacristy Press, pp. 161-167

³ Jackson, *Consensus* article, op. cit.

⁴ Clark, *Building Kingdom Communities*, op. cit.

⁵ Jackson, M. (ed.) (2019) *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*. Durham: The Sacristy Press, p. 2-3

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50

I here focus on the role of a renewed distinctive diaconate. However, I believe that in the diaconal church those currently appointed by the church to undertake some form of society-focused ministry (for example, ministers-in-secular-employment, many chaplains, ‘mission enablers’, ‘pioneer ministers’ and so forth) should be seen as an integral part of a renewed diaconal order. This means that within the diaconal church there is a very large ‘hidden diaconate’ waiting in the wings to swell the numbers of those formally commissioned to be deacons.⁹

At the present time, there is a growing awareness across many churches that a renewed diaconate has unrealized leadership potential of great importance for ‘the new era’ ahead.¹⁰ The problem is that, because many church leaders have thought little about what it means to be a diaconal church, and especially the complementarity of the church as institution and the church as movement, there is little understanding of the potential of a renewed diaconate or agreement as to what it should look like.

In exploring the ministry of a renewed diaconate, Michael Jackson’s observation that the diaconate currently forms a spectrum of confusing diversity has to be taken as something of a complication. Nevertheless, despite the present kaleidoscope of diaconal roles and responsibilities, I believe it is increasingly clear what must be the role and responsibilities of a renewed distinctive diaconate within the diaconal church, the church to come.

A renewed diaconate’s liturgical vocation

Within the diaconal church, a renewed diaconate’s participation in worship would facilitate a sense of common purpose, collegiality and mutual support between the church as institution and the church as movement, between it being a community of continuity and a community of transformation.

When involved in the leadership of worship, a renewed diaconate’s task is not to clone the role of the presbyter nor to take on the task of presbyter’s assistant. It is to engage in those aspects of the liturgical life of the diaconal church which bring to the fore the Trinitarian commission to the people of God to be kingdom community builders in the life of society and world.

Rosalind Brown argues that, liturgically, a renewed diaconate is one which exercises ‘a ministry of hospitality’¹¹ in preparation for, during and after worship. She maintains that to focus the deacon’s liturgical role on hospitality means that a deacon should be ‘on the church door to welcome and reassure people’¹², involved in the reading of the scriptures and the leading of intercessions, prepare the table for holy communion, and offer a dismissal which ‘orders rather than invites people to leave the church to live (out) in the world’¹³ that way of life embodied in the worship in which they have been engaged. A renewed diaconate also has

⁹ See Clark, D. (2016) *Building Kingdom Communities - with the diaconate as a new order of mission*. Peterborough: FastPrint Publishing. pp. 137-139

¹⁰ See Jackson, *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*, op. cit. See also Clark, D. and Staton, M. (November 2019) *Towards a renewed diaconate – Signposts from ‘The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective’*. Unpublished - downloaded from: <https://sites.google.com/view/skdiaconate2018/articles>

¹¹ Jackson, *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*, op. cit., p. 161-167

¹² Ibid., p. 164

¹³ Ibid., p. 167

a responsibility to speak (preach) during worship about the insights they have gained whilst engaged in furthering the communal transformation of society.

Leadership roles of a renewed diaconate

In large part as a result of the seminal work of John Collins offering a new understanding of *diakonia*, understanding of the ministry of a renewed diaconate has now moved well beyond the traditional concept of ‘humble service.’ This transition in no way devalues the selfless service typical of the diaconal associations of Europe in the nineteenth century, and in many places still ongoing. Indeed, the call for the deacon ‘to pour himself/herself out in service to the outcast, the marginalized, the poor and suffering... as Jesus did’, as Gloria Marie Jones urges,¹⁴ is as crucial as ever.

Nevertheless, the urgent task now is to relate the commission (*diakonia*) of a renewed diaconate to the missional imperatives of the twenty-first century. In that context, the apostolate of a renewed diaconate is to fulfil the mission of the diaconal church and, therefore, to be focused on the building of kingdom communities within every sector of society. It needs to be stressed that this is a call to clear and significant leadership responsibilities.

In this leadership capacity, a renewed diaconate has two core roles which are *church-facing*: **enabler** and **educator**, and three core roles which are *world-facing*: **catalyst**, **intermediary** and **partner**. The other roles identifying servant leadership – visionary and strategist – remain important and come into the picture as and when needed.

Which servant leadership role comes to the fore will be determined by the specific context within which deacons are working. In Appendix 4, in relation to my own diaconal experience, I offer some idea of how the empirical context shapes the roles required.

The deacon as enabler and educator

To equip the diaconal church as a movement for communal transformation, the key church-facing roles exercised by a renewed diaconate as servant leaders are those of *enabler* and *educator*.

A renewed diaconate as *enablers* seek to bring into being a church and that manifests the kingdom community’s gift of liberation. This entails freeing lay people¹⁵, the church’s mission resource in today’s world, to pursue ways in which the diverse communities in which they are involved can more fully manifest the gifts of the kingdom community. For lay people, *institutional* communities of practice within the world of work¹⁶ will be especially important as a focus of their ministry.

However, the role of a renewed diaconate as enablers will often open up the possibility of their supporting lay people in kingdom community building in *non-institutional* communities of practice focused on social and political issues and concerns

In exercising the role of *educator*, a renewed diaconate engages lay people in a journey of discovery concerning the meaning and process of communal transformation. This means

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 153

¹⁵ Self-supporting deacons will usually have a personal mission responsibility in relation to the communal transformation of their community of employment similar to that of lay people.

¹⁶ Clark, *The Kingdom at Work Project*, op. cit.

lay people acquiring a deeper understanding and experience of the kingdom community at work in the world. The deacon as educator encourages the questioning of evidence, the challenging of values and the testing out of received wisdom. Here the gift of learning comes to the fore.

The tasks of a renewed diaconate as enablers and educator will include:

- *gathering* the people of God as and when necessary, to reflect on their ministry in daily life,
- *inspiring* them for their community building vocation in the wider world,
- *affirming, equipping and mentoring* them for that calling,
- *encouraging them to share* their experiences and insights with one another,
- *empowering* them by means of access to spiritualities associated with the gifts of the kingdom community,
- *modelling* for them, as a diaconal order of mission, what it means to be a kingdom community.

The deacon as catalyst, intermediary and partner

To equip the diaconal church as a movement of transformation, the key world-facing roles exercised by a renewed diaconate as servant leaders are those of *catalyst, intermediary and partner*.

Catalyst

I have argued that communal groups, especially *non-institutional* communities of practice, and the movements which give them coherence and influence, are of vital importance in the communal transformation of societies, and the institutions which embody the latter's values and norms. Consequently, the role of a renewed diaconate as a *catalyst* should be to the fore in helping to further this institutionalization process. This means deacons engaging with, affirming and aiding the development of non-institutional communities of practice as an essential part of their ministry.

The role of catalyst will involve a renewed diaconate in a process of discernment and intervention. This needs to include deacons:

- identifying the issues being pursued by non-institutional communities of practice: for example, preventing pollution of the environment (life), alleviating drug abuse (liberation), meeting the needs of asylum seekers (love), or improving adult illiteracy (learning).
- discerning and drawing attention to the gifts of the kingdom community being employed by these communities of practice or movements.
- discerning what and how such communities and movements, Christian or otherwise, are making manifest or neglecting the gifts of the kingdom community.
- affirming and promoting their endeavours where those gifts are present; challenging their endeavours where those gifts are neglected.
- forging connections between communities of practice and communal movements so that they can more fully share their visions, experiences, insights and skills.
- encouraging such communities and movements to work as partners¹⁷ in addressing issues of common concern.

A renewed diaconate, for example, might work with groups and movements opposing the destruction of the planet (upholding the gift of life), encourage those confronting racism or

¹⁷ See also Clark, *Handbook*, op. cit., p.14

gender inequality (employing the gift of liberation), support groups and movements opposing the ill-treatment of migrants (furthering the gift of love), spur on those seeking to confront fake news or indoctrination (offering the gift of learning), and affirm groups and movements challenging autocratic leadership (by upholding the gift of servant leadership). Deacons as catalysts would also align themselves with groups and movements confronting xenophobia or jingoism, by proclaiming the universality and inclusivity of the kingdom community.

Deacons do not remain secretive concerning the source of the gifts of the kingdom community. They measure their interventions by the words of Christ that ‘a sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’ and that ‘the sound’ and the ‘bad’ tree can be distinguished from one another by their fruits (Mt. 7: 18, 20). At the same time, they seek any opportunity and every way possible, not least by the quality of their life as an order and through ‘mission as dialogue’, to ‘declare the wonderful deeds of him who called (them) out of darkness into his marvelous light’.¹⁸

Intermediary

Another key role related to the ministry of deacons as servant leader is that of *intermediary*. This involves a renewed diaconate facilitating the networking of groups and movements working for communal transformation, Christian or secular, in ways which can release and enhance their community building potential. Often collectives engaged in this task lack either the imagination and motivation, or simply the time and energy, to share their insights, expertise and resources.

Deacons as intermediaries have the task of facilitating creative connections so that the work of those concerned can be enhanced and given greater dynamism. It is a role which reminds those involved in kingdom community building that it is an undertaking which must be open and inclusive. The deacon as intermediary also helps groups and movements to resolve those inevitable conflicts and disagreements which may disrupt their community building task. Here the associated skills of reconciler, mediator and negotiator come to the fore.

Partner

The deacon as *partner* co-operates with all those agencies working for the communal transformation of society and world. This means seeking a purposeful ecumenical partnership with Christians from every church and those of other faiths who are in any way engaged in the work of the communal transformation. It is also a role which requires deacons to enter into partnerships with secular groups, associations and movements which have a similar communal agenda.

Other leadership roles

As and when needed, the servant leadership role of *visionary* will also energize and inform the ministry of a renewed diaconate. The deacon as visionary is one grasped and inspired by the vision of a world communally transformed by the gifts of the kingdom community. It is a vision that not only imagines what such a world would look like but how that vision might be made a reality. As *strategists*, the deacon becomes an ‘organizational architect’ (Senge, 1990

¹⁸ 1 Peter 2: 9

p. 343) who strives to ensure that such communal visions and their values inform and shape the practice of all those social collectives with which they are involved.

An ‘order of transformation’

I regard a renewed diaconate as ‘*an order of transformation*’, one complementing that of presbyters as ‘an order of continuity’. Representing the servant leadership of the diaconal church as movement, its primary commission is to work for communal transformation *within every sector of society*. In this task, it will seek to be alongside all those, Christian or of other convictions, striving to make manifest the gifts of the kingdom community.

At the same time, a renewed diaconate, as a communal movement, is commissioned to be an order of transformation *within the life of the church*. A renewed diaconate has the responsibility, exercising the role of servant leaders, to remind the church as institution that it is the servant of the kingdom community and also needs to be transformed by and manifest its gifts.

A renewed diaconate as ‘a religious order’

Unless a renewed diaconate takes the form of ‘*a religious order*’, its contribution to the mission of the church as movement in the twenty-first century will be diminished. However, the nature and form of a renewed diaconate as a religious order needs to fit the nature of a new era and not attempt to clone the form of religious orders of the past.

There are already precedents for this. The British Methodist Diaconal Order is a religious community whose strength is enhanced by networking, regular face-to-face and virtual meetings, area groups and an annual convocation. Mutual pastoral support is very strong. Its members pray for one another on a regular basis using a prayer diary which has a photograph, the location and, expressed in brief, the particular concerns of each member of the order recorded. There is also a rule of life suited to the needs of the order.¹⁹ Its members are male and female, single and married, and employed full-time or part-time by the church or secular agencies.

Profile and formation

The members of a renewed diaconate will be both women and men, a development still not the case in the Roman Catholic Church where the former remain excluded. Its members will be married or single, of diverse ethnicities and may have varied gender orientations. They will be employed full-time or part-time by the church, or by secular agencies.

The selection and training of a renewed diaconate as an order of transformation is all-important. Diaconal formation should not try and clone that of presbyters who, as an order of continuity, have a very different role to fulfil within the diaconal church. The aim of such a diaconal curriculum is that deacons will have a thorough grasp of a communal theology of the kingdom, of the ecclesiology of the diaconal church and of its community-building mission.

Deacons as members of an order of transformation need to acquire the skills of servant leadership. This means a much more ‘professional’ form of training, calling on secular experience and resources, and perhaps requiring some form of external accreditation. A

¹⁹ On the British Methodist Diaconal Order as a useful model, see: Clark, D. (2018) *The Gifts of a Renewed Diaconate - and the contribution of British Methodism*. Peterborough: FastPrint Publishing

renewed diaconate also needs to engage in relevant supervised practice. In-service development is essential and should be ongoing.

Deacons as members of secular communities of practice

Within the diaconal church as movement there will be deacons who continue to be employed, full or part-time, by secular bodies associated with the world of work. They may also have formal responsibilities within collectives associated with the voluntary sector. In this context, their calling remains that of exercising the servant leadership roles set out above whenever and wherever possible. However, because of their secular employment, their ministry may at times become more akin to that of lay people, that of furthering the communal transformation of the workplace through their personal discernment and intervention.

Overview

In a renewed diaconate, the church is offered a new order of ministry which can liberate the people of God for their mission ‘to grow the kingdom’, as Alison Peden puts it²⁰. The birth of a renewed diaconate as *an order of transformation*, empowered by also being *a religious order*, offers the diaconal church a radically new form of leadership able to give fresh clarity and impetus to the life and message of the kingdom in today’s fragmented world.

Bishops - ‘an order of unity’

In the diaconal church, bishops, alongside presbyters and deacons, are servant leaders. Their primary role is that of intermediary, though other servant leadership roles often come into play. One reason for this is that their responsibilities span the diaconal church as both institution and movement. Their task is to ensure that the people of God are aware of their responsibilities as members of the church as institution, facilitating the continuity and celebration of the Christian legacy embodied in the gifts of the kingdom community. It is also to help the people of God understand and be equipped for their calling as members of the church as movement, engaging in the work of kingdom community building in society and world. These responsibilities alone require the bishop to be able to fulfil a diversity of roles associated with that of servant leader.

In the diaconal church, bishops have a special concern that presbyters and deacons in their care work together to further the communal integrity of church and society. They are committed to ensuring that the two orders understand and affirm one another’s distinctive callings, presbyters as an order of continuity and deacons as an order of transformation. Bishops encourage the two orders to communicate clearly and openly, and share their experiences, insights, skills and resources. The bishop also has the responsibility of promoting the formation of team ministries made up of lay people as well as presbyters and deacons.

Bishops are charged with being the ‘official’ voice of the diaconal church in the public realm. As symbolic figures, they represent the diaconal church, be it institution or movement, as the servant of the kingdom community and of humankind. Their commission is to enable church and society to manifest the gifts of the kingdom community - life, liberation, love, learning and servant leadership - as fully as possible. This means that their public calling is ‘to speak truth to power’, not least on behalf of the poor, oppressed and marginalized, so that the communal dilemma can be resolved, and the coming into being of a global community of communities facilitated.

²⁰ Jackson, *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*, op. cit., p. 186

Because bishops of the diaconal church represent the integrity of the diaconal church as institution and movement, and the ‘communal holiness or wholeness’²¹ of church and world, I identify them as ‘*an order of unity*’.

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²¹ Clark, *Reshaping the mission of Methodism*. op. cit.