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The Diaconal Church: Anglican and Lutheran Perspectives

Gordon A. Jensen

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada are undergoing some seismic changes – changes that have been happening below the surface for quite some time now. These changes, however, are shaping and re-shaping the church in ways that are both needed and helpful if the church is to be relevant in today's world. One such seismic change is the (re)discovery of the importance of *diakonia*, or the ministry of deacons (also called diaconal ministry), in the church and for the sake of service in the world.

The ministry of deacons in the church is not new. The appointment of the first deacons occurs in the book of Acts (6:1–7), when Stephen and six others are set apart for a ministry of service of feeding the poor and caring for the widows. Over the years, the ministry of deacons evolved to include assisting in the liturgy and, by the third century, to assisting the bishop – especially in the liturgy.¹ By the fourth century, however, with Christianity becoming officially recognized in the Roman empire, there was a dramatic shift in the role of deacons. As the role of the presbyter (pastor or priest) became more appealing to people in a church that was suddenly more powerful, the role of the deacon diminished. Many of the authoritative and liturgical functions of deacons were taken over by the presbyters; not coincidentally, the diaconate was increasingly relegated to women, and the ordination of deacons ceased.² The rise of monasticism also brought about change, with women's religious orders taking over many of the non-liturgical functions of the diaconate. The sixteenth-century Reformation further diminished the role of the diaconate in its push for the common priesthood of the baptized. Lutheran deacons served a role in social welfare, while in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches the diaconate became a steppingstone on the way to the priesthood. It was not until the renewal of the diaconate in Lutheranism, under the leadership of people such as Wilhelm Löhe, a pastor in Neuendettelsau, Germany, that the ministry of the deacon again emerged to its rightful place. Löhe organized a diaconate, along with affiliated homes, hospitals, and educational institutions, thus setting the stage for the arenas in which the deacon would function. Shortly thereafter, Pastor Theodor Fliedner established a training school for deaconesses in Kaiserwerth, Germany, which became famous for, among other things, one of its students: Florence Nightingale.³

Despite the revival of the ministry of deacons in the church in the 1800s, many of the emerging Lutheran church bodies in Europe and North America did not recognize their central role in the life of the church. For example, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the diaconate was even recognized as a rostered ministry of Lutheran churches in North America. This began to change in the last decade of the twentieth century, and by the beginning of the twenty-first century the Lutheran World Federation and the World Anglican

¹ Susan Wilds McArver, "A History of the Diaconate," in *Word and Sacrament: Renewed Vision for Diaconal Ministry*, ed. Duane H. Larson (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999), 64.

² McArver, "History of the Diaconate," 69.

³ Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 183, 187–88.

Communion conversations began to explore the role of deacon in earnest. The ministry of the deacon was finally being appropriately recognized.

In the process of reaching a full communion agreement between the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, one of the sticky issues that presented itself was the different understandings of the role of deacon in the two churches, and the framers of the agreement noted the diaconate as one of the important topics to be discussed upon reaching an agreement on full communion between the churches. One of the topics that needed to be addressed was the question of whether the office of deacon was a permanent role or a temporary step on the way to becoming a presbyter (pastor, priest).

This volume of *Consensus* seeks to provide a glimpse, however brief, into the ministry of the deacon and what a church shaped by a ministry of deacons may look like. This volume also slightly departs from the traditional academic style of articles in an attempt to better give readers a sense of what deacons do, side-by-side with articles on the deacon and the church. Thus, the first two articles, by Deacons Gretchen Peterson and Lisa Chisholm-Smith, give accounts of the ministry of two deacons in two very diverse ministries. Following this, there are articles by Michelle Collins, Maylanne Maybee, and Iain Luke on what a diaconal church does – and can – look like in twenty-first-century Canada. Also included in this volume of *Consensus* is a reflection by D. Michael Jackson on the current status of the diaconate in the Anglican and Lutheran churches in Canada. The volume concludes with a reflection by William Harrison on the role of theological education for developing a diaconal leadership in the church. Each of these articles was originally presented at a Clergy Day, sponsored by the Saskatchewan Synod of the ELCIC and the Anglican Diocese of Qu'Appelle, under the title “The Diaconal Church: An Anglican Lutheran Conversation,” in November of 2021. The editors of *Consensus* thank the presenters for their willingness to allow their presentations, edited for publication, to be presented in this volume, and to have their presentations ready for publication so soon after the conference concluded.

It is our hope that this volume will help readers better recognize the central role of the deacon in the life of the church and – just as importantly – the role of the deacon, as an embodiment of the church, in ministry in the world.