

Consensus

Volume 43
Issue 1 *The Diaconal Church: Anglican and
Lutheran Perspectives*

Article 2

1-25-2022

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Recommended Citation

Peterson, Gretchen (2022) "My Sense of Call as a Deacon," *Consensus*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 2.

DOI: 10.51644/VFMU9974

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol43/iss1/2>

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My Sense of Call as a Deacon

Gretchen Peterson¹

I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you a little bit about my sense of call as a deacon. It is a call that I have lived into for the past thirteen and a half years. It still feels like home, and feels like the right place for me in the church and in my community; the right vocation for me, in which I can advocate for the voice of youth in our churches and in our communities—a voice that is all too often forgotten.

I grew up in the Lutheran church and come from a family of pastors. I always knew that I didn't feel called to be a pastor. My leadership gifts for the church were affirmed from the time I was a youth, and I was happy to serve as a reader. In college I was a campus peer chaplain, and I was a youth leader for many years in university. I always knew that being a pastor was not my call. So instead, I used my gift for community building and my ability to speak in front of people, combined with my love for the natural world, to work on a Bachelor of Science in Environmental and Conservation Science. And I started working for Alberta Parks as a park interpreter.

One winter, all of my friends moved to Saskatoon to attend the Lutheran Theological Seminary (LTS). I had wrapped up my park job and had a few months until I needed to go back to the park, so I decided I might as well go to Saskatoon as well. Everyone goes to Saskatoon for the winter, right? I found myself going to the Seminary as often as I could, sitting in on classes and attending chapel. It was there, in a place where I thought they only trained people to be pastors, that I learned there was this other profession within our church: Diaconal Ministry.

The more I learned about it, the more I felt that I could focus my work within the church and use my work experience and education focus in a church profession – without having to become a pastor. It was a great fit! Consequently, the next year I started the certificate program, and I was the first person to graduate with the Diaconal Certificate from LTS. I was able to take a class that focused on youth and young adult ministry during my time there.

My first call was to work as the program director at Camp Kinasao, which was a good blend of my diaconal and theological training and my environmental science degree. Following that, I served at a congregation for a short time, but most of my work since then has been at the synodical and national level, in youth ministry.

Throughout my thirteen and a half years of working, I have always felt called to diaconal ministry, in youth ministry. I feel called to push our church to listen to what the youth are telling us about gender equality, social justice, reconciliation, and climate justice. I want to help our youth have a voice at meetings where decisions are being made, and I want to help our church catch the vision of church and faith that our youth have. I also want to help youth see their gifts for ministry, and encourage them to use them in the church and in the world.

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The expressions of diaconal ministry in the Lutheran church do differ from those in the Anglican church. For example, Lutheran deacons are not often tied to a congregation or parish in a formal way, even though we may lead worship and participate in the life of a congregation. In fact, most of our deacons do not work for a congregation. And I would argue that the place for a deacon is not working in a congregational setting – unless they are working alongside a pastor. Often, when a deacon serves at a congregation by themselves, they get shifted into the role of a pastor, which isn't a true reflection of a diaconal call.

Most of our Lutheran deacons serve under what we refer to as a *Call to Specialized Ministry*, which may include, but is not limited to, serving as an assistant to a bishop, working for a community organization, working at a long-term care home as a chaplain, working for a synod in the area of mission, or being a spiritual director. These are just a few examples. These calls, I think, make more sense for deacons, especially when we consider that diaconal ministry is a call to serve as a bridge between the church and the world.

What are my experiences as part of a serving church? I believe there are things we are doing, both in the Lutheran and Anglican churches, that are indications that we are a serving church. But I also believe there is a lot of room for growth in this area. One of the areas of growth includes being a serving church that sees the needs of those outside the walls of the church building – even those who might never believe in Christ – and attends to those needs. In the aspirational statements set forth in the 2019 “Reimagining Our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC,”² the future vision of our church is named as being a church that is missional, diaconal, and prophetic. This is a bold statement. And it is one in which we are all called to participate – not just those of us with a call to Word and Service. It is our baptismal call to engage in this work. It involves lay people, pastors, priests, deacons, and bishops. So how can we move into being more of a serving church? How can we dream about being more missionally focussed? How can we speak prophetically into the world? These are difficult things to do, because they cause us discomfort.

Deacons are not the only answer for the future of the church. But if we want to be a church that is fulfilling the ministry to which Christ has called us, then listening to deacons and seeing where they are pointing to – in the community – is a great place to start.

A deacon will raise questions and initiate conversations that point outward, encouraging the congregation, parish, synod, and national church to look beyond itself. The focus of the conversation will need to be on the needs of those outside of the normal circle of those who belong to the organized church. The conversation will change from what our building maintenance needs are, or what time worship should be, to making observations such as, “you know, I've noticed we have a lot of lawn space that could be turned into a community garden,” or “why don't we invite all our neighbours to the fall supper?”

Jesus Christ was a great deacon! Jesus surrounded himself with those on the margins. He listened to them and attended to their needs. He created space for them and cared for them. That is the model for a serving church. Being a serving church means to follow the example of Jesus in our care for creation, for each other, and for all of humanity. It means being willing to live with being uncomfortable. It means being prophetic when we need to be. It means not shutting ourselves up inside our church buildings. Instead, a serving church

² Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Reimagining our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC: Reader's Guide* (Winnipeg 2019), https://elcic.ca/faithorderdoctrine/documents/ReimaginingOurChurch-PublicMinistryintheELCIC-ReadersGuide_FINAL.pdf.

is called to go out into the community and find out what the people need. Then we are serving as Christ served while he was among us. Thus, I would encourage all of us to ask these hard questions and search out a new way to be a serving church, today. Not only does our world need us to join in serving the world and all creation, but we need to do it for our own sake, so that we can live as God's people who are fully alive for others.