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My Ministry as a Deacon

Lisa Chisholm-Smith¹

As of March this coming year I will have been an ordained Deacon for eight years; however, I have a deep sense that I have actually been engaged in diaconal ministry for much longer. My main contribution to the church's mission, both as a deacon and previously as a lay professional in the Anglican Dioceses of Ontario (part of Eastern Ontario) and Ottawa, has been through education with a focus on equipping the baptized for ministry in the world and in the church.

Since April 2016, I have been serving in a part-time paid position as the Anglican Chaplain at Queen's University out of St. James' Anglican Church in Kingston, Ontario. St. James, which is located on the Queen's University campus, has been the focal point for Anglican ministry with university students since the early 1990s. As an expression of diaconal ministry, this position connects postsecondary students and the world of the academy with the church. I support mainline Christian students as they seek to live out their vocation as university students and as they discern where they may be called to use their gifts and talents in their vocations/careers in the future. I also serve as St. James' Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator. Together these two ministry positions form one half-time paid position (in theory), which has allowed me time to serve on the board of directors of Anglican Deacons Canada (formerly the Association of Anglican Deacons in Canada), first as Vice President and now as President. I am also a part-time Guide Leader with the First Meadowbrook Pathfinder unit, working with girls aged 12 to 14.

In addition, since I live and work in what might be called the prison capital of Canada, pre-pandemic my parish work also gave me the opportunity to work with inmates who do community service at St. James. I am a volunteer non-security escort with Corrections Canada, which means that I am able to pick up and transport inmates to and from the church for community service.

The ministry of the vast majority of deacons in the Anglican Church of Canada is strictly non-stipendiary, and in my experience, many Anglican deacons are retired from whatever paid or unpaid work they did before they were ordained. Thus, the fact that I am now serving in a half-time paid ministry position out of an Anglican parish is unusual. Some deacons, though, are employed in positions outside of the church which are clearly diaconal in nature—for example, as prison, hospital, or Anglican school chaplains. Others work in settings and positions where the diaconal nature of what they do may not be obvious, but where they still are called to exercise ministry.² Regardless, for most deacons, unlike priests or pastors, the place where they *work* (or volunteer) is most often different from the place where they *worship*. As the ordination service for deacons in *The Book of Alternative Services*

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² The Anglican Diocese of New Westminster in particular has a well-developed understanding of the deacons' workplace ministry.

puts it: “You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you *live* and *work* and *worship*.”³ In my case, the scope of my ministry includes a university campus as well as a church.

The Anglican Chaplaincy at Queen’s encourages postsecondary students and young adults to follow Jesus with intelligent and compassionate faith and deep joy. In my capacity as part-time chaplain, I work closely with the Queen’s Canterbury Club and organize the liturgy and invite the speakers for their weekly Sunday evening event, *The Gathering*. *The Gathering* is a short evening prayer service with a guest speaker followed by a discussion time and a free, shared meal. Food is an essential element of all campus ministry. The students and young adults take various roles in the service including celebrant, lector, and intercessor. Guest speakers include professors, students, graduates, members of our sponsoring parish, and other resource people. I am delighted that, after offering *The Gathering* exclusively on Zoom during the pandemic, at the time of writing this we are back in person and able to enjoy a free, shared meal again with appropriate COVID-19 safety measures in place.

This fall we launched *The Gathering* and marked the season of Creation with a four-part series called “Is the Bible Green? The Christian Scriptures and Ecology” led by an Old Testament scholar. Then, at the urging of my Lutheran colleague in ministry, I invited the new dean of Queen’s Smith School of Business to come to *The Gathering*. A person of colour who is originally from the USA, Dr. Wanda Costen shared two powerful stories of recent experiences of racism in Canada and energized the students with her vision for businesses that take an active role in promoting and enabling the common good.

In my current ministries, it is a particular delight to work in partnership with St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in Kingston and their pastor Seth Perry. Seth and I formed a joint youth ministry during the pandemic through Zoom youth sessions. This past summer, our youth participated in the Canadian Lutheran-Anglican Youth Gathering together at a hybrid event. Now youth from St. James and St. Mark’s are meeting weekly together in person on Friday nights with the support of student interns hired by St. James through the Queen’s Work Study program. We also collaborate in campus ministry, and last year St. Mark’s Lutheran underwrote the costs to have an ELCA Lutheran Pastor (who is involved in the Black Lives Matter movement) speak at a national online *Gathering* event on “Systemic Racism and Reparations.”

Formation and Vocational Call

I have a passion for lifelong Christian formation and am particularly interested in helping Christians integrate their faith and their daily work, whether paid or volunteer. In November 1998 I attended the annual conference of a US-based international, ecumenical network called the Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life (CMDL) at a retreat centre outside of Chicago, Illinois. I immediately felt like I had come home. This event turned out to be the first of many CMDL gatherings I participated in, and my work on its board of directors (which included a stint as vice-president) changed my life and connected me with a great many resources and resource people. The president of the Coalition at the time was Sally Simmel, former Director for Ministry in Daily Life for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a

³ *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada with the Revised Common Lectionary* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 655.

department that is now sadly no longer in existence due to cutbacks. I even became CMDL's first and only paid staff person for the duration of an 8-month contract in 2002. Even though CMDL members came from many different places in North America, many denominations, and many different professional fields, we had a deep affinity with each other since we all shared a passion for strengthening and empowering the ministries of Christians in the world. It was also at that Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life conference in 1998 that I experienced a surprising and powerful call to ministry as a deacon.

How my Role Enables/Equips the Diaconal Church

I resonate with some of the language used in the Church of England's service for the ordination for deacons: "In baptism the whole church is summoned to witness to God's love and to work for the coming of his kingdom ... Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-offering. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission."⁴

In his book *Breaking the Mould of Christendom: Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity*, UK Methodist David Clark, another member of CMDL, envisions that:

Within the diaconal church, the deacon, like the presbyter, is a servant of the kingdom community and a servant leader of the laity ... However, it is of importance to recognize that *the form of church* for which the deacon takes the main responsibility is the dispersed church, the people of God called to be the servants of the kingdom community in the world. Thus the *people served* by the deacon are the laity as that church dispersed in the world.⁵

Service and care for the dispersed church is indeed one significant dimension of diaconal ministry. There is more to diaconal ministry than this, but this is an aspect which particularly resonates for me in my life and ministry. Within the Anglican Church, discussions about a deacon's liturgical role focus exclusively on the roles undertaken during the Sunday morning Eucharist - proclaiming the gospel, modeling the servant ministry of Jesus by setting the table, and sending God's people out to serve God in the world through the dismissal. However, in my experience, little attention is given to prayer and the possibilities for what might be called para-church liturgies of the word which affirm and nurture specific groups of Christians as they seek to serve Christ in the world. While my primary ministry has been through education, I have also found ways to affirm and minister to members of the dispersed church through prayer and liturgy. On a variety of occasions, I have crafted public prayers and planned Services of the Word that affirm the vocations of specific groups of Christians in God's world, assist them to connect their work and their faith in Christ, and bring before God their needs and concerns in meaningful ways.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the class of 2020 at Queen's was graduating with no ceremony or collective acknowledgement apart from a diploma that would be sent in the

⁴ "The Ordination of Deacons," Common Worship, The Church of England, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/common-worship-ordination-0#mm012>.

⁵ David Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom: Kingdom, Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity* (Werrington: Epworth, 2005), 114.

mail. So this year I put together a special, short liturgy of commissioning for our five graduates and also wrote a specific prayer for a PhD candidate who was in the midst of writing her thesis. This liturgy clearly touched these graduates and the PhD student in a meaningful way, and I invited them to shine their light by lighting a candle or turning on a flashlight in their Zoom windows. However, probably my most powerful experience of prayer and liturgy designed for a specific group of Christians occurred when I was a newly ordained deacon working in the Diocese of Ottawa. I participated in a book and art series which gathered Christian artists and others, like me, who did not consider themselves artists but were interested in exploring how creativity feeds us spiritually. At our final session, I offered to offer prayers which affirmed these individuals' callings as artists. I, and a presbyter who was also a member of the group, closed our session by anointing⁶ the hands of those who wished with a prayer asking that God would use their hands and creativity to bless others. The presence of God was palpable in our midst, and after all who had wished to receive this anointing prayer had received it, we sat in silence in God's presence for a few minutes absorbing what the Holy Spirit had done in our midst.

Similarly, a participant at one of the two "Serving Christ in the Classroom" gatherings for teachers I organized while serving as Coordinator of the School of Lay Ministry for the Anglican Diocese of Ontario commented that it was the first time they felt the church cared. It was the first time that the church had affirmed their calling in the world and specifically prayed for their ministry in the classroom. I also believe that my public prayers were used by God to anchor and comfort the board and staff of Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) (a national ecumenical social justice organization) during a period of significant organizational change and to touch the hearts of those gathered to launch CPJ's public website in 2008. I will close my remarks with a vision of the diaconal church which I penned for a special meeting of the Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life which took place in Chicago at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's national office:

But what if the CHURCH is like an airport. Whether it is a tiny single dirt runway in some remote place or a huge airport with many different terminals in a major city, an airport exists for one reason: to enable passengers and goods which travel on planes to get to their destination. Similarly, the church, as the gathered community of Christ's people in a particular place, is a support system and structure to enable God's mission in the world. Our job is to make sure that the people of God are equipped with what they need to get to the places God wants them to go and to do the things God wants them to do there.

Churches need to be places where God's aircraft can be re-fueled and repaired. Places where God's crew members can make connections and receive direction for their next flight. Where clergy and lay leaders are like the ground and security crews that work both upfront and behind the scenes to prepare us for our takeoffs and landings. Just as it takes the coordinated effort of teams of workers each performing a particular task to enable an aircraft to take flight and bring its passengers and cargo safely home, so the church enlivened by the Spirit is called to be united by a common purpose and coordinated in its efforts to fulfill Christ's mission in the world. We depend on the Holy Spirit to equip us to fulfill this purpose. Prayer, for us as Christians, is as vital as air-to-ground, ground-to-air communication.

⁶ We anointed their hands with our fingers rather than with oil – although I am permitted to anoint with oil in the Diocese of Ontario, deacons are not permitted to anoint in the Diocese of Ottawa where we were.