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Models of a Diaconal Church

Michelle Collins¹

I came to my current ministry position from the United States of America, where I most recently served on synod staff in the Florida-Bahamas Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and before that I worked in children and youth ministry. In times of transition – like moving to a new country and starting a new call – I find myself reflecting on how I got where I am and what I hope to be able to do now that I am here. I am not the first one to propose that the whole church is going through a bit of a transition. This transition may be due to this pandemic but, in reality, it is due to all sorts of other factors that the pandemic has magnified, accelerated, or exposed. And so, as we consider how we got here and what we hope to do now – and particularly what the language and framework of *diakonia* has to offer us – sharing some of my own call story as a Lutheran deacon may help make some connections with how a diaconal vision for the church might inform a sense of mission. I say this because, when we talk about participating in God’s mission, we are talking about our call. So perhaps there’s something to learn in retelling or reclaiming the church’s call story.

I like to say that I sort of “stumbled” into being a deacon. I grew up in a non-denominational context, but went to a Lutheran university because I received financial aid by simply acknowledging that I was baptized as an infant in a Lutheran congregation. One major discussion I had with my mom in high school was whether being baptized in a Lutheran congregation with which I had no personal connection really made me Lutheran. But when it came to financial aid, I put that discussion aside. So I went to a Lutheran university, but I spent most of the first few years both critiquing what I experienced as the lukewarm faith of my peers and questioning the rigid edges and expectations of my own faith and background. Then, during a study abroad semester in England, I met a Lutheran pastor who invited me to read Luther’s *Small Catechism* and talk with him about it. In our discussions about baptism and communion, I discovered a vision where, in Jesus Christ, God initiates and pursues relationship and reconciliation with creation and freely offers grace and love to all. In those conversations, the gospel came alive for me in a new way. I graduated from university even more discontent with my own tradition and background, but deeply compelled by the witness and message of the gospel and wanting to keep saying “yes” to following Jesus ... even though I really didn’t know how that looked in actual practice. But Luther’s explanation of baptism and communion and this idea that the life of faith is in response to God’s love and forgiveness, not the requirement to qualify for God’s love and forgiveness, had gripped me, and I began re-forming my experience of and relationship with God.

In searching for a faith community after university that both embraced me as a young adult and did not demand that my faith be neatly packaged into an acceptable box, I began attending a Lutheran church in my neighbourhood. As I got involved in this congregation, I

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found myself deeply moved by the liturgy, the rhythm of confession and forgiveness, the implications of sacramental theology, and a broad commitment to diversity and advocacy. I still had questions about the connection between baptism and faith formation though, and sensed that, if Lutherans realized what they were saying about baptism, they would have significant contributions to broader conversations about discipleship. Instead, for some reason there was a disconnect, and most people struggled to articulate a call to discipleship and could only ever talk about experiencing God in broad and abstract ways through supportive relationships ... or maybe sometimes in communion or at summer Bible camp. But it was through participating in this congregation and being invited to hold my questions and wonderings openly that I began sensing that maybe God had something to say to and through me in the Lutheran church.

These questions about how Lutherans understand baptism and how that understanding informs the life of faith led me to seminary, where I had to decide whether I was feeling called to Word and Sacrament or Word and Service rostered ministry. Since I had no intention of working for “the church” but just wanted to better integrate my external life (work, volunteer presence, etc.) with my faith, Word and Service was the route I took. By the end of my time in seminary I was planning on becoming a preschool teacher, and hoped to find ways to strengthen a congregation’s connection to the families with young children in their community. At this time in the ELCA, there were 3 different Word and Service rosters, and I explored each one of them through my candidacy journey – as people around me noticed strengths and passions in me, as I deepened my understanding of what I believed God was doing in the world, and as I considered what participating in that work would look like for me as I learned more about the specific institution and structures within the ELCA. Along the way, I discovered the Deaconess Community of the ELCA, and landed there for the final phase of formal formation and preparation for public ministry. A few years into rostered ministry as a Deaconess, the churchwide conversation about Word and Service ministry led to a resolution at the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to merge the three Word and Service rosters into a new roster of Deacons, and those of us from previous rosters who were either consecrated or commissioned were now to be considered ordained Deacons.

Informed by tradition and history, attentive to context, engaged in theological reflection, listening to internal and external voices, and responsive to the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, I now see the church exploring its own call to ministry as we acknowledge the ways the world to which we still feel called has changed and is changing. I hear a growing desire to reclaim a vision for discipleship and spiritual formation that is distinctive to our understanding of God’s relationship to creation and humanity and leads to both liberation and transformation. I sense a yearning to more actively equip people to live into a baptismal vocation that informs the expansiveness of their identity as God’s beloved. And I am encouraged by the possibility that *diakonia* may be a lens through which we can continue articulating and participating in God’s action in the world.

A renewed vision for diaconal ministry that is shared by the whole church grows out of reflecting on what we profess in baptism and communion. In baptism we are invited into the mission of the church. As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) document *Reimagining Our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC* says, “When we are baptized, we are baptized into God’s mission. If the baptized see their everyday occupations and roles as vocations and as opportunities to participate in what God is doing in the world, God’s mission

is being realized.”² This document, which was the result of a broader exploration of public ministry in the ELCIC and consequently resulted in bringing resolutions for consideration at the national convention in 2019, makes a strong case for reclaiming Luther’s understanding of vocation as a way to engage the whole community of faith in intentionally participating in God’s mission. “The mission of God is to form loving communities through which each and every part of God’s creation is loved and valued. The church’s mission is to participate in God’s mission,” and the church does this by working for reconciliation and right relationships, speaking out about public issues, and by being a prophetic word in and for the world.³ That is diakonia—fueled by the invitation to discipleship and strengthened by the community of faith, responding to the immediate needs of others, working for reconciliation and right relationships, being agents of change to transform unjust structures, and safeguarding the earth.⁴ The church’s mission is a diaconal mission. “Every baptized person and every community of baptized persons is called into a life of diakonia, delegated service.”⁵ Said another way, “diakonia is central to what it means to be the church. As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship.”⁶

What might it look like for the church to be informed by a diaconal lens as it participates in God’s mission? In what way is the church’s call to mission a diaconal call? Leaning on some foundational diaconal language and images, a few core practices might emerge from a diaconal vision for mission:

1. *A diaconal church is shaped by the incarnated Christ.* While diakonia is expressed and defined in a variety of ways throughout history and across traditions, at the heart of it is the life and witness of Jesus Christ, who was the incarnation of God’s presence in the world. Deacons seek to be the hands and feet of Christ in their context. A diaconal church takes this call seriously. It understands that “the point of Christianity is to communicate the good news that God’s ultimate relationship to creation is the unconditional promise made in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.”⁷ In his essay “Where Culture and Call Mix,” Carl Ficken has stated that “A Lutheran spirituality is rooted in a positive and affirming view of creation; it is incarnational, concrete, and has an earthly or fleshly character to it.”⁸ A diaconal church understands that “to be the body of Christ is to know that, despite our differences, we have been baptized into a relationship with One Lord who calls us to share our gifts and our love so that the body of Christ might be extended into God’s world ... our oneness rests precisely in Christ.”⁹ This commitment to be the body of Christ in God’s world unified by Christ

² Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Reimagining Our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC* (Winnipeg: ELCIC, 2019), 14, <https://elcic.ca/Documents/documents/ReimaginingOurChurch-PublicMinistryintheELCIC-Oct2019.pdf>.

³ *Reimagining Our Church*, 14.

⁴ *Reimagining Our Church*, 15.

⁵ *Reimagining Our Church*, 28.

⁶ Reinhard Boettcher (ed.) *Prophetic Diakonia—for the Healing of the World*. Report: “Letter from the Global Consultation,” Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002. As quoted in *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2006), 11.

⁷ *Reimagining Our Church*, 31.

⁸ Carl F. W. Ficken, “Where Culture and Call Mix,” in *From Word and Sacrament: A Renewed Vision for Diaconal Ministry*, ed. Duane H. Larson (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999), 160.

⁹ Ficken, “Culture and Call,” 158.

and extending into God's world would anchor the church in worship and the sacraments, while also ensuring that the rhythm of gathering, word, meal, and sending really does inform and permeate Monday to Saturday.

2. *A diaconal church emphasizes, equips, and empowers the whole community to live out their vocations in the world.* Deacons are often asked to justify or defend why they did not go “all the way” to become pastors. This perspective reinforces a pastor-centric understanding of vocation and ministry, and minimizes the diaconal call to accompany both pastors and lay people. A diaconal church, on the other hand, understands that a pastor-centric model of ministry – where priority and emphasis are given to and held by a select group of trained and paid clergy and “vocation” is reserved for those who are employed by the church – is no longer the most effective way to respond to the gospel and participate in God's mission in our changed and changing context.¹⁰ It makes a shift from a hierarchical understanding of church that reinforces clericalism to a more communal understanding “which stresses the congregation as community of forgiveness and reconciliation, and a community within which disciples are nurtured for the life of service (diakonia) in the world.”¹¹ *Reimagining Our Church* goes on to cast a vision where “each Christian recognizes their baptismal call to serve the world by speaking and living the gospel promise,” and where “every baptized person and community ... is called into a life of diakonia.”¹² The role of rostered leaders in this sense becomes to enable, equip, and empower vocational living as each person explores who God is calling them to be in all aspects of their lives and as the whole community claims a baptismal identity.
3. *A diaconal church keeps the doors and windows open.* Deacons often describe themselves as called to the intersection of the church and the world. Their work often calls them to walk back and forth between the church and world, representing and advocating in both spheres. Formed by the life and example of Jesus, it is those edge places to which the whole church is called. In a 2006 Lutheran World Federation essay on diaconal ministry in India, the author says that “the church is sent into the world ... to bear witness to God's salvation for humanity and creation as a whole (Mt 28:16ff.; Rom 8:18ff.). But ... this is not just a one-way communication. The church is not just sent into the world, but is itself part of the world ... The church has reason to listen to the world and to learn from it.”¹³ It listens to outside voices and celebrates the ways God is expressed in and at work through creation and the other. A diaconal church keeps the doors and windows of the sacred community, sacred space, and sacred practices of worship and liturgy open so that the needs and resources in the world and the presence and promises of God are able to encounter each other, and the boundaries between the church and context become permeable.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Reimagining Our Church*, 12.

¹¹ Rebecca Sangeetha and Anand Sebeyan Hemrom, “Responding to Poverty and Exclusion: The Diaconal Ministry in the UELCP” in *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church*, ed. Duane H. Larson (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2006), 28.

¹² *Reimagining Our Church*, 35.

¹³ Reinhard Boettcher, “Toward Lutheran Theological Understandings of the Diaconal Ministry,” in *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church*, ed. Duane H. Larson (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2006) 21.

¹⁴ *Reimagining Our Church*, 52.

4. *A diaconal church seeks healing, transformation, and liberation.* Jesus's ministry was a ministry of healing, transformation, and liberation – whether it was healing physical illness, transforming spiritual vision, or exposing systemic injustices. The diaconal tradition throughout history has also been a ministry of healing, transformation, and liberation as the church has reflected on the needs in its community and responded by training nurses, teachers, and chaplains, advocating for civic change, or in other ways tending to physical, spiritual, and emotional pain. But as the whole church sees itself caught up in this ministry of healing, liberation, and transformation, it is essential that the diaconal actions of good works are more and more deeply “seen in connection with Jesus Christ’s compassion” and in connection with the Holy Spirit who liberates and transforms.¹⁵
5. *A diaconal church serves as Jesus served.* Biblical stories of service are often at the heart of a diaconal vision. Deacons draw from the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in John 13, or the early church selecting a group of people to ensure the marginalized widows were being fed in Acts 6. The image of the bowl and towel become symbols for this posture of bold service and innovative care of neighbour. Diaconal service is not a submissive, passive service, nor is it a patriarchal, one-sided service. Diaconal service is an accompanying service that dismantles unhealthy and unhelpful power to be in solidarity with the victim and bring about transformative action.¹⁶ It is a sacrificial service that gives of its own life for the sake of others. More reflection can be done on the ways these particular biblical stories have been interpreted, and ongoing care needs to be taken to ensure these texts don’t become justifications for unhelpful or unhealthy practices of charity. But, guided by Jesus’s own claim that he came “not to be served but to serve,”¹⁷ a diaconal church is oriented externally towards God’s world in compassion, solidarity, and sacrifice.
6. *A diaconal church works across boundaries to expand impact, build partnerships, and empower engagement.* The day when any one Christian community can expect to be self-sufficient in all areas of discipleship and service is over—and maybe was never a possible or helpful image in the first place. As denominational identities and institutional loyalties change, the diaconal church embraces the diversity of God’s people and seeks out opportunities for partnership and collaboration. This does not mean a weakening of theological integrity or a minimizing of spiritual formation. But it does mean staying open to working with those of other faiths and others of good will to challenge the roots of injustice, to speak and act prophetically, and to accompany those on the margins of society and to advocate alongside them.¹⁸ For Lutherans, reflecting on Luther’s particular interpretation of baptism, vocation, the priesthood of all believers, and the mission of God and God’s church empowers us to engage and embrace the vast gifts of ecumenical, inter-faith, and other community partners. While these partnerships are currently often a commitment at the national

¹⁵ Stephanie Dietrich, “Ecclesiological Reflections on the Diaconal Ministry: A Norwegian Perspective,” in *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church*, ed. Duane H. Larson (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2006), 68.

¹⁶ Sangeetha and Hemrom, “Poverty and Exclusion,” 25.

¹⁷ Mark 10:45, NRSV.

¹⁸ *Reimagining Our Church*, 35.

or synodical level, a diaconal church would embrace partnership and collaboration at the local level as well.

There is nothing particularly unique or distinctive about these practices that have been delineated. When we are at our best, hopefully we already do many of these things as the church. Similarly, a vision for diakonia is not necessarily a new vision. The church throughout history has developed and used diaconal language and practices in a variety of ways. But that is the joy of participating in God's mission. As we tell the stories of God's faithfulness in the past, as we reflect on the traditions and practices that have strengthened and sustained us until now, and as we bring to mind the anticipation and promise of the new thing that God is doing in our midst, a diaconal emphasis offers a new dimension and direction that drives us into the next phase of following God's call.

Viewed from the perspective of all the challenges and realities we are currently facing, it is essential that the church consider again what vision is drawing us into mission and ministry today. One approach to this wondering assumes that a predesigned structure has been defined and dictated by history, tradition, and maybe even theology, and it is the contemporary church's job to fit itself into that mould. If we go back to our own call stories, this might look like comparing ourselves to an "ideal" pastor or deacon and trying to emulate them more specifically. In the church more broadly, it might be seen in the emphasis on always using the early church as the ideal example of and model for ministry and mission, and the claim that if we just got back to how the early church did it we would succeed. This approach might focus on all the ways we have "gotten off track" from this theoretical ideal, something that we need to achieve again. But chances are your call to serve God and God's church has taken its own set of twists and turns, and it looks different or distinct from any ideal or static image. Similarly, Lutheran reflections on the diaconal movement and diaconal theology tend to assume that there is not a clear or consistent definition or description of *diakonia*.

Yes, it is true that throughout history the Lutheran diaconal movement has had a variety of expressions – each one with its own set of strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities – and that at the current time global organizations like the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, and World Diakonia continue to understand, express, and structure diaconal ministry differently. Yet, however *diakonia* looks and however it is structured, Lutheran diaconal movements have emerged in response to local contexts and through theological reflection. This can be helpful in forming our approach to the conversation of the church's mission in this time and place. Rather than seeking to reclaim or rebuild some pre-set model of "church" that we think will guarantee success (however we define success), the variety and diversity of diaconal expressions throughout history and around the world invite us to be open to asking questions about what God is doing in and around us today, and invite us to be flexible and willing to experiment with new expressions or methods that might be emerging to allow us to more fully participate in God's action. Within the Lutheran tradition that emphasizes that God is often found in mystery, ambiguity, paradox, and questions, we are invited to be attentive to how God is revealing Godself in the both/and of church *and* world, pastor *and* deacon, rostered leaders *and* lay people, organic community *and* structured organization, faithful contemplation *and* prophetic action, denominational particularity *and* ecumenical partnership, tradition *and* innovation.

The mission of the church is to participate in God’s mission. That is our call. It is the mission of the whole church—not just pastors, priests, bishops, deacons, and other “church professionals.” It is the mission of the whole church. Identifying, understanding, and articulating what that means and how that looks is a journey that is not without its detours and sidetracks, as is reflected in many of our call stories. We are finding our way forward by the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are called to this journey not only through the laying on of hands and the words spoken at our consecration or ordination but through the water poured and the words said in our baptism. Those of us in particular leadership roles, who express our baptismal call by being set apart for “public ministry” have an opportunity to walk with and alongside whatever expression of the body of Christ we are part of. Our calling is to help people make sense of and get caught up in this journey—both individually and corporately. *Diakonia* may be a way to inform this journey at this time. In this season of transition and change as a church, as we reflect on how we got to where we are and how to make sense of where we find ourselves today, we join those who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). As we engage others along the way, as we ask questions about our history, tradition, and current experiences, as we extend sacrificial hospitality to the stranger and break bread with those around us, we might discover that our hearts are stirred and that we indeed have once again encountered Christ.