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## The Marks of a Diaconal Church

Maylanne Maybee<sup>1</sup>

The last forty years have seen a revival of the diaconate as a distinctive order in the Anglican Church of Canada and a parallel evolution in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. And, while there may be an emergent understanding of who deacons are and what they are for, the larger issue is the effect of this revival, if any, on the shape of the church. This paper is a reflection on the marks of a Diaconal Church from an Anglican perspective, within the framework of my own sense of call to the diaconate.

My sense of vocation developed in my teens and early adulthood when I considered various possibilities open to women – becoming a missionary, becoming a nun, becoming a nun *and* a missionary. When I was ordained a deacon in the diocese of Niagara in 1978, it was still very controversial in the Anglican Church – both in Canada and globally – for women to be ordained at all, especially to the priesthood. Unlike many of my contemporaries, I didn't feel a strong sense of call to the priesthood, and I didn't particularly want to engage in that controversy.

As a teenager, having lived in the Middle East and seen something of the conditions of life in that part of the world, I was far more interested in addressing issues of domestic and global poverty and injustice than in doing parish ministry. I didn't see the church doing these things in a very visible way, despite what I was hearing in our prayers and gospel readings, and I didn't see deacons doing them either. Most deacons I was aware of were in that office for six months or so on their way to becoming priests. The few “permanent deacons” I knew of were retired men in Anglo-Catholic parishes helping with visiting and pastoral care. I didn't know any deaconesses until much later.

In the early 1980s, while I was still a theology student, a classmate invited me to attend a conference about “The Deacon” at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, sponsored by The Episcopal Church. There, I discovered the beginnings of a movement to restore the diaconate as an order with its own integrity, a “full and equal order” alongside the priesthood and in the context of a robust baptismal ecclesiology. I knew instantly and profoundly that that was what I wanted to do, and that was where I belonged.

At the conference, I was drawn by a sense that the emphasis of the ministry of deacons was more horizontal than vertical – focused on love of neighbour arising out of our love of God. I was drawn to the idea of *liminality*, articulated by the anthropologist Victor Turner – that place at the margins of social systems inhabited by poets and monks and street people and clowns. It's a threshold place of “energy from the edges” that is characterized by *communitas*, an unstructured community where people are equal and experience the spirit of community. I saw a renewed diaconate as a state of sustained liminality that might invite equality and community among and with people – women, children, gay people, racialized people – who were invisible to the church and often excluded from its life and leadership.

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I was drawn by the *practical* role of deacons in the local community. I was struck by a phrase I read, that the reason the church needed deacons was to have leaders who work out of a diaconal-eschatological basis of the gospel “so that diaconal preaching does not become dogmatically abstract or pessimistic about the world, nor make formless, unrealistic calls for help, without saying who is to be helped, or where, or how.”<sup>2</sup> Diakonia at the local level has a vital role in avoiding the pitfalls of a laity with no specific sense of direction or obligation, and the need for personal as well as institutional care for the afflicted and those in need.

## Potential Models of a Diaconal Church

While these images and ideas – of neighbourliness, liminality, solidarity with the marginalized, and practical leadership in the congregation – resonated deeply with me and my sense of calling, I was also motivated by the vision this opened up of what the Church could become. I equated the revival of the diaconate with the model of a Servant Church, one of five (later six) models proposed by Avery Dulles in his seminal book *Models of the Church*.<sup>3</sup>

By the use of “models,” Dulles wished to convey an understanding of the church that goes beyond the limits of verbal definitions and embraces the dimension of symbol or image rooted in scripture, theological history, and the corporate experience of the faithful. The models he proposed are summarized here, with a reference to familiar hymns that illustrate each model.

1. **The Church as Institution.** This model emphasizes the structures and order of the Church over against “the world.” It is expressed in the passage “...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,” (Matthew 16:18 NIV), and we hear of it in the Council of Jerusalem found in Acts. Its functions are teaching, sanctifying, and ruling. Its marks are clericalism, an hierarchical view of clergy as the source of power and initiative in contrast to the passivity and lower position of the laity; juridicism, where authority is conceived in terms of law and penalties; and triumphalism, an army arrayed against Satan and the forces of evil. The Church is regarded as a political power holding the sole means of salvation. Hymn: “The Church’s One Foundation.”<sup>4</sup>
2. **Mystical Communion.** This model emphasizes a community that is related by Spirit, whose members are connected not just by human relationships but by God, who unites us one to another, expressed in the language of “the Body of Christ” or “the People of God.” It is reflected in the words of Jesus: “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” (Matt. 18:20 NIV). The church is understood as a warm and welcoming community sustained by fellowship and hospitality, yet more than that, as a mystical communion



<sup>2</sup> H. C. von Hase, “Diakonia: Today’s Task,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (March 1967): 59.

<sup>3</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Image Books, 1987).

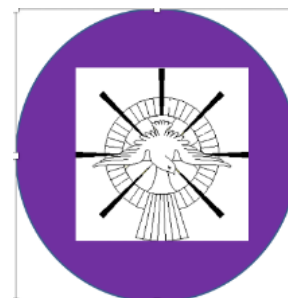
<sup>4</sup> *Common Praise* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), Hymn # 525.

bound together by the very Spirit of God. A hymn that reflects this model is “One Bread, One Body, One Lord of All.”<sup>5</sup>

3. Herald. The model of the church that is represented here emphasizes the Church’s prophetic role of denouncing evil and proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. It is expressed in the imperative, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” (Mark 16:15 NIV). The Church is regarded as the messenger of God’s saving love in the world, calling everyone to renewal and reform. The model highlights the evangelizing function of the Church and recognizes the role of language in assembling and unifying human communities. It is most strongly reflected in Lutheran and other Reform traditions. A hymn that reflects the Herald model of the Church is “Go to the World! Go into all the earth.”<sup>6</sup>



4. Sacrament. The Sacrament model of the Church emphasizes the Church as a visible sign of God’s grace, the living presence of Christ in the world today. A scriptural basis can be found in Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world.” The church becomes a sign of hope of a new society by modelling itself on Kingdom values. It brings out the symbolic quality of human life, but the sacramental focus may diminish the Church’s outward, apostolic mission. A hymn that reflects this model is “You are the salt of the earth, O people!”<sup>7</sup>



5. Servant. The fifth model of the Church emphasizes the Church’s commitment to doing what Jesus did in caring for “the least of these my brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25) and exemplified in washing the feet of his disciples (John 13). This model pays attention to the action that needs to accompany proclamation and to doing what Jesus did as a living out of our faith. It has inspired the Church’s institutions of charity, as well as its prophetic voice against injustices. The strong overlap with the world’s needs and agenda risks falling into secularism. The fifth model of the Church is reflected in the hymn “Sister, Let Me Be Your Servant.”<sup>8</sup>



6. Community of Disciples. This is a sixth model, where the emphasis is on people who follow Jesus, who try to be like him in everything they do and say and pray, and know that following Jesus may lead to sacrifice and suffering. The emphasis is on the process of learning (hence the notion of discipleship) and the role of the church in the process of education that informs, forms, and transforms. A hymn that reflects this model is “Will You Come and Follow Me.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Common Praise*, Hymn # 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Common Praise*, Hymn # 598.

<sup>7</sup> *Common Praise*, Hymn # 507.

<sup>8</sup> *Common Praise*, Hymn # 500.

<sup>9</sup> *Common Praise*, Hymn # 430.

Before going further, I want to address the ambiguity of the notion of servanthood and, by extension, a “Servant Church.” The Greek word *diakonia* is often translated and understood as “ministry” or “servanthood.” When I wrote my MDiv thesis in the 1970s, I gave it the title of “The Diaconate: A Ministry of Servanthood and Leadership.” However, I have come to see the limitation of that kind of language. Jung-Hee Park was a student, originally from Korea, at the Centre for Christian Studies where I was serving as Principal. Her experience as the citizen of a country that had been humiliated on the world stage led her to emphasize that “our focus [should be] on creating a more just world, in which neither we nor anyone else bends the knee to a lower class or tiptoes to the powerful ...”<sup>10</sup>

I have come to prefer to use the original Greek word *diakonia* without translation – with its connotations of partnership, friendship, mutuality, and leadership rather than “servanthood.” For me, *diakonia* is a paradox of self-emptying and raising up, of stepping aside by those in power and stepping up by those at the grassroots. It is a dynamic of using liminal spaces to create the conditions among strangers or unlike people for friendship and mutuality – either by voluntary displacement of one’s privilege, or by the bold assertion of one’s gifts.

### Characteristics of a Diaconal Church

What are the characteristics of a Diaconal Church? First, a Diaconal church is one that seeks to extricate itself from the colonial and empirical aspects of Christendom to which we still cling. We need to stop being a “conquest religion” as Thomas King calls it in *The Inconvenient Indian*.<sup>11</sup> If you take Avery Dulles’s models of the church as a point of departure, none is entirely exclusive of the other, but the one that seems to be most entrenched is the “institutional” or Christendom church that tends to focus on and imitate the kingly and priestly aspects of Christology, but not so much the prophetic.

Our Church is still struggling to emerge from that paradigm. And the way forward is by recalling and practising the prophetic tradition of our faith that follows the example of the prophets of ancient Israel and the witness of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Douglas John Hall reminds us of the priorities of a prophetic church in his chapter “Christianity and Empire” in the book *Waiting for Gospel*. These priorities are:

- An orientation to truth – not as a possession but as a living reality, driven by “hunger and thirst after righteousness” that is not satisfied with comforting fictions or facile half-truths. Prophetic consciousness is impelled to speak, to name deception for what it is.
- A witness to suffering – that is not seduced by ideologies of success, but rather gives open expression to human and creaturely pain where it exists, that does not shy away from the language of lament, and that locates hope in the belief that God participates in human suffering and offers redemption through that participation.

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<sup>10</sup> Jung-Hee Park, “Why do I have a problem with the word ‘service’ and the image of ‘servant’ for diaconal ministry?” *Diakonia of the United Church of Canada*. <https://www.ducc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Park-Jung-Hee-image-of-servant-for-diaconal-ministry.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2012), 103.

- A solidarity with those who are marginalized by our social systems.... not only the “preferential option for the poor” of liberationist theology, but also the abiding suspicion of the rich and the powerful that we find in the God of our scriptures.<sup>12</sup>

We need to become a church that is learning to read scripture with “third world” eyes, with eyes of BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour), in our own communities and globally. What can we learn from the “gospel-centred discipleship” that has become an important and dynamic part of the growing spiritual movement among Indigenous Peoples? The Bible has to be read and interpreted not only by European or North American scholars who do the reading and the teaching but by a community or circle of people in dialogue with one another. Those who are trained have to re-learn to look at scripture with those who have their own categories for understanding the word of God.

We need to become a church with liturgies and patterns of ministry that are decolonized. Archbishop Mark MacDonald has held up the Friday or Saturday night Gospel Jamboree as an authentic, local, Indigenous alternative way of worshipping to the Euro-centric midmorning Sunday liturgy of the mainstream church. The pandemic has helped us discover that Sunday Eucharist is not the only way to gather and worship. (I say this in all humility, as I have many, many times tripped on my black shoes as a liturgical terrorist, and I think that is a strong temptation of deacons who are so often misused or neglected in their liturgical role).

A Diaconal Church is one that is willing to rethink its practices and structures of ministry and compensation. We are still strongly attached to the notion that those called to the priesthood should be ordained to the diaconate first and continued to be regarded as deacons on the grounds that *diakonia* is foundational to all ministry. I believe this is a failure to recognize *baptism* as the foundational sacrament that imprints all Christians, who are the *laos* or People of God, with the character of Christ’s *diakonia* and priesthood.

As an aside, one feature in the renewal of the diaconate that I never contemplated was that it would become the fixed practice across the dioceses of the Anglican Church of Canada that presbyters would be stipendiary (paid by the church with benefits) but deacons would not, the assumption being that one ministry is professional and the other is not. I share the conviction of Deacon Phina Borgeson who says, “I do not think that we pay a person for their sacramental ministry. ... If we pay a person in the name of the church, we pay them for their expertise in administration, counselling, teaching, community organizing, etc. not for any sacramental ministry they might provide.”<sup>13</sup>

How then do we organize the ministries of our communities around the gifts of the Holy Spirit? How do we deal creatively with the entrenched assumptions we have about traditional forms of ministry?

At another level, a Diaconal Church is one that is radically ecumenical in the true sense of that word—not just inter-denominational but engaged with the communities of the whole inhabited earth. I learned that the essence of *diakonia* is ecumenical, especially since serving as principal of the Centre for Christian Studies in Winnipeg, a United and Anglican theological school, and then of the United Theological College, which is now aspiring to become a United-Anglican school with the Montreal Diocesan Theological College.

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas John Hall, “Christianity and Empire,” in *Waiting for Gospel* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), 153–54.

<sup>13</sup> J. Phina Borgeson, “Ministry-to-Go,” *Open* (October 1977), 5.

In those roles I came deeply to respect the United Church's commitment to the principles of the social gospel: its struggle for theological integrity; its hunger and thirst for justice; its wide, warm embrace of sexual and racial diversity; and its joyful, Spirit-filled worship. Likewise, as a participant in the Joint Anglican Lutheran Commission, I am learning from the richness of our similarities and differences. I'm especially grateful for the Lutheran deaconess tradition which gives texture and substance to my Anglo-Catholic centred understanding of orders and ministry.

On a trip to China a few years ago as part of a church delegation, my eyes were opened to the great possibilities of living into a post-denominational Christianity. I consider this ecumenical direction a vital mark of *diakonia*. I also believe that it can become the basis for interfaith dialogue that is so crucial to the health of our planet.

At the same time, a Diaconal Church needs to be local and contextual, and to have a theology that is local and contextual. I want to be part of a church that is striving to be grounded in baptism, to embrace the baptismal ministries that are being identified, called forth, and formed in every locale – including those that are considered small, isolated, remote, or ethnically/culturally/linguistically distinct. I want to be part of a church that really believes that the gifts for leadership, including the presbyterate and the diaconate, are present within any and every community. How do we develop processes of formation, licensing, and authorizing that are appropriate to the conditions and context of every community?

A Diaconal Church is one that relates deeply to the needs of the place where it lives, that is willing to learn anew the reading of scripture, to recreate its liturgy, to develop its own theology, to discover its own structures of ministry.

## Conclusion

I confess that, when I was ordained a deacon those many years ago, I thought the Church would change more substantially than it has. I thought that the diaconate would thrive, that there would be a more level playing field for deacons and priests, some paid, some non-stipendiary, that as our congregations became smaller, we would open our buildings for social housing and community meals.

I anticipated a church that would transition willingly out of the triumphalistic paradigm of Christendom, embrace its growing smallness, and re-think its structures of ministry formation, compensation, and decision-making. I imagined that a renewed diaconate would provide balance to a priest-centered church and pull us – far more quickly and radically than it has – toward our citizenship in the world.

To be sure, we are moving in that direction, and I still see a lot of hope and possibility. My vision for a renewed diaconate is that it will help us become a Diaconal Church, a vulnerable and involved church that uses our resources for the common good, that brings our deep gladness to the places of the world's deep hunger – for economic justice, racial justice, gender justice, for peace, for the reconciliation of peoples, for care of the Earth, our island home. May it be so.