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Practising Our Diaconal Ecclesiology: An Anglican Perspective

Iain Luke¹

Baptismal Ecclesiology Is Diaconal, and Vice Versa

My first real encounter with diaconal ways of thinking about the church came during a time when I served in the Diocese of Rupert's Land as the lead resource person for baptismal ministry development or, as it was known at that time, "Total Ministry." In that role, I found that the first steps in helping people to see a new model of the church came when we talked about *flipping the pyramid*:

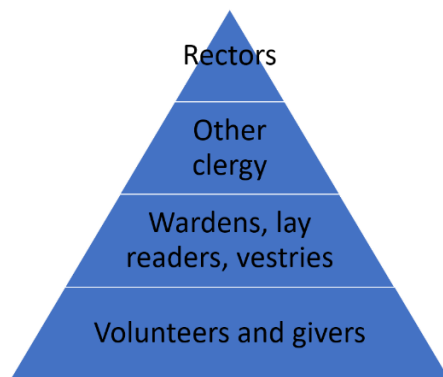


Figure 1

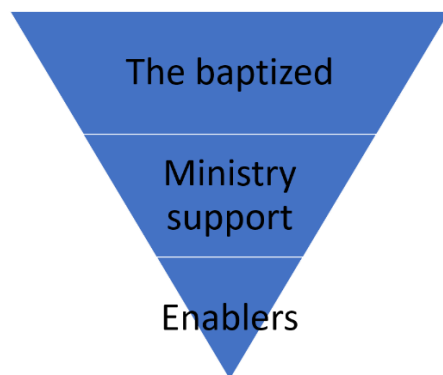


Figure 2

Figure 1 shows a traditional, hierarchical picture of the church, in which the clergy in charge of parishes are the focus. They are supported by other clergy, by lay leaders in the church's structures, and by the church members, but the role of all these others is ancillary to the leadership. By contrast, *Figure 2* identifies the primary location of ministry as among the baptized; that is, the members of the church who put their faith into practice every day,

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wherever they are. A few of the baptized find that their gifts and callings are to support the ministry of all, by staffing institutions, offering communication and coordination, praying, or cheerleading. The structures of Total Ministry (which can go by other names, such as Local Shared Ministry) often identify “ministry support teams” in local settings, bringing together lay and ordained leaders to focus on supporting the ministry of the whole congregation. There is still a role, in this pattern, for a person with a formal theological education and a ministry job: they act as coach and mentor to the team or, as New Zealand Anglicans term it, the “enabler.”

After I presented these diagrams a few times, one perceptive respondent commented, “That looks awfully uncomfortable for the person at the bottom of the second pyramid.” Indeed! Their insight led to a further reflection: that we might want to knock some of the pointy edges off the triangle and embrace something that looked more like a circle or a spiral, in which each act of ministry would feed all the others.

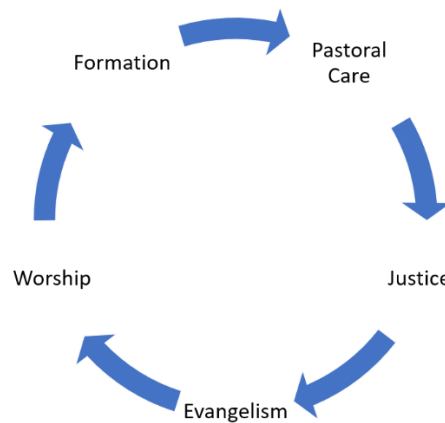


Figure 3



Figure 4 -- *Vicissitudes*, 2007²

² Jason deCaires Taylor, *Vicissitudes*, 2007, concrete, Molinere Bay Underwater Sculpture Park, Grenada. Photo by SunCat - *Vicissitudes* 3, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=109089641>.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 depicts one circular model of ministry, with worship leading to Christian formation, generating a call to offer pastoral care and promote justice for all, which people receive as good news, drawing them into the worshipping community, and so on. Even this model doesn't seem quite enough, though, as it risks the church becoming focused on its own activity and turning inward on itself. So the last, and most important step, is to "turn the circle inside out," as depicted in the picture on this page. Looking outward, the figures can turn their attention to God's activity in the world, preceding them and inviting them to work with and alongside their neighbours.

It is this outward-facing posture which I think of as diaconal ecclesiology: a church which exists to look for what God is doing in the world and to join in. In the Anglican tradition, this attitude was most famously expressed by William Temple, the World War II-era Archbishop of Canterbury, who said, "The church is the only institution which exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members," or words to that effect.³ Understanding the church in this way, the primary question for us to ask about ourselves is not "How are we organized?" but rather "Who are we for?" To whom are we sent to exist for their benefit? And what does that look like? Following in the example of Christ's diaconal living, we might say that our *diakonia* can or should be secret, obstreperous, loving, angry, focused, fast-moving ... and perhaps all of these things at once.

Deacons as an Icon of Diakonia

If we think about the church through the lens of both diaconal and baptismal ecclesiology, we are compelled to say some new things, or to say some old things in a new way, about ordination. The most convincing model I have found for this is the *iconic* model; that is to say, the way in which the ministry of the ordained represents, embodies, and reflects the ministry of the whole church as a visible symbol of the ministerial identity of all the baptized.⁴ For Anglicans, the iconic model has had some mileage in relation to the ordained priesthood, as the church increasingly recognizes itself as the eucharistic community. Priests and pastors, in this model, lead from within the community, by example, or by equipping the church to fulfill its calling, in ways which reflect the inverted pyramid or the circular systems we considered earlier. What the iconic model seeks to avoid, though it remains a temptation, is for clergy to do the work of the church by delegation: "I will do it, so you don't have to."

The ordained diaconate can be considered in a similar pattern, with the order of deacons embodying the call to the whole church to be an agent and messenger of the reign of God. This way of thinking makes sense of how the ministry of deacons is called forth in particular places, where the local church itself is diaconal in spirit, or where the context and conditions of life demand a diaconal response from the church. The ordination of a deacon does not relieve the church of its duty to respond, but rather offers a way to focus and enable its response. In Canadian Anglican practice, where deacons are generally non-stipendiary, the working conditions of deacons militate against the kind of role confusion which

³ Given that this sentence does not appear in Temple's published writings, the reader may suspect me of perpetuating a fake Internet attribution. Witnesses do exist, however, to Temple's use of the phrase in his public speaking.

⁴ I am grateful to another presenter, the Rev. Deacon Dr. Maylanne Maybee, for the reminder that the icon of ministry first provides a window into the ministerial identity of Christ. In this way, what the church "sees" in the ordained is its own identity arising out of the incorporation of the baptized into Christ.

sometimes besets priests, whose institutional job descriptions often overwhelm the primary duty to represent and embody Christ's call to the whole church.

There remain some challenges in applying the iconic model to the Anglican Church of Canada's current practice relating to the order of deacons. The lower profile of the diaconate means that the church gives greater emphasis to the iconic function of priests. The reality that the archetype of priestly ministry is a paid position adds further reinforcement in a society in which "money talks." Where deacons are present and visible in local churches the balance can be righted to a certain extent, but for Anglicans in many places that is not yet a reality.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Canadian Anglican experience of the diaconate is framed around the hope that the presence of deacons will make our self-image, our ecclesiology, more diaconal. *The Iona Report* on the diaconate makes this explicit:

The redevelopment of the diaconate has recalled the church to a fuller and more vital expression of its ministry as agents of mercy, healing, and justice in the world, especially among those living at the margins of systems and society, restoring the image of Christ who came "to bring good news to the poor." Women and men called to this ministry of sacramental presence in the world serve as a reminder to the people of God that all are likewise called to follow Christ's example of *diakonia*... Ministries of service are being done by God's people whether or not there are deacons, just as ministries of oversight, teaching, and unity are being done whether or not there are bishops. But a full and vital diaconate along with a full and vital priesthood and episcopate gives completeness to our common life in Christ.⁵

Issues in Canadian Anglicanism

While this statement expresses a hope, there are features of life in our church which still fall short of the vision described in *The Iona Report*. Our ecclesial partners need to know where and why the vision has been unevenly fulfilled, and the Anglican Church of Canada itself needs to recognize areas where we still have work to do. I have hinted already at two sources of this unevenness: diocesan jurisdiction over policies and practices relating to the diaconate, and the unfinished work of integrating deacons and *diakonia* into the life of the institutional church.

The first of these points is not wholly a weakness. Diocesan control over diaconal policies and practices, in some ways, strengthens the recognition that diaconal ministry emerges from the life of the local church, where the baptized are called into communion with one another and into the service of God's mission. The variety of local practice enables a process of testing multiple approaches and affirms the particularity and distinctiveness of context-based models of ministry. These include the unique value accorded to the diaconate in the Indigenous church; models of team or Total Ministry, in which deacons work in structured partnership with priests and lay leaders to support the ministry of the baptized; diocesan sending initiatives, where deacons lead, represent, and model the ministry of the entire diocese in a particular sector or agency; and, of course, parish-based models of diaconal work.

⁵ *The Iona Report: The Diaconate in the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto, ON: The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2016), 19, <https://www.anglican.ca/resources/the-iona-report/>.

The variety of practice can, however, be an obstacle and a frustration, not least when it hinders the contribution a renewed diaconate can make to the diaconal identity of the whole church. Since the diaconate, and *diakonia*, are characteristic of the church catholic, local churches are accountable to one another for the particular form diaconal ministry takes in their context. This is the impulse which lies behind *The Iona Report*, as well as the existence and activity of the national organization Anglican Deacons Canada (ADC). Accountability need not and should not mean standardization, given that the diaconal identity of the church inherently emerges from its many local settings. One could even say that contextuality is a catholic or universal principle for the church's ministry. But we do need a shared language in which to learn from one another's context-based experience, and this need is reflected (as between Anglicans and Lutherans) in Commitment #4 of "Called to Full Communion: The Waterloo Declaration," where our churches undertook "to work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry."⁶

While the localness of the diaconate is a mixed blessing, the incomplete integration of the diaconate into the church's self-image is a more telling sign of an ecclesiology that still needs work. As one illustration, diocesan policy manuals exhibit a consensus that a deacon is not normally paid a stipend, yet this is a two-edged sword. It supports a degree of independence within the institution, but it leaves deacons (who have their own living to make) with less time to use that independence in order to bring about change from within. The same issue further exposes ongoing questions about access to the diaconate, classism, and clericalism, all of which speak to assumptions about whose ministry and leadership the church actually accepts.

Challenges to Address

I conclude by outlining a number of implications for the church's practice, touching both on the ministry of deacons and on the diaconal identity of the baptized. First, let me draw out some implications for the liturgies by which we ordain and baptize people.

As people in the Anglican Church of Canada begin to open up questions about reforming the services for ordination, we will need to keep in mind this core relationship between the baptized and the ordained, expressed by the iconic model. Perhaps even deeper than that lies the question: What do the baptized need the ordained *for*? This is the question around which, I believe, the teaching portions of the ordinal, and the questions asked of candidates, could be reframed. It is especially important that the diaconal call of the church be expressed as foundational to our life in Christ, and that therefore the diaconate be seen as foundational to the representation of ministry in the church, not merely preliminary to, or even coordinate with, the ordained priesthood. As revisions in this direction are explored, it will also be important to consider how well the service of baptism articulates the diaconal call of the church and all its members.

Outside liturgy, but still in the context of parish life, there are further implications. As we are already seeing, the emphasis of pastoral leadership will shift further, from ministering to those in a position of weakness in the community towards developing the

⁶ "Called to Full Communion: The Waterloo Declaration," The Anglican Church of Canada, The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2001, <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/eir/full-communication-partnership/waterloo/>; "The Waterloo Declaration," Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 2001, <https://elcic.ca/What-We-Believe/Waterloo-Declaration.cfm>.

capacity of every member to carry out their ministry. Such a shift will need to be reflected in the things we measure to quantify “success” in ministry. In place of the old standby of attendance figures or collections, I have heard suggestions ranging from adult professions of faith to bomb threats as indications of the impact ministry is making.

The greatest shifts are happening, and need to happen, at the point where congregational life intersects with the wider currents of the world. Our use of buildings came under special examination during the COVID-19 pandemic. How can church buildings, classically seen as the point of gathering and nourishing the body of believers, instead become a platform for community engagement? Other contemporary currents invite us to pay attention to context in multiple ways, including the land where we live, the nature of community relationships, the identity of our neighbours, and the ecosystem in which we all participate.

All these questions are indications of an ecclesiology which is, gradually, becoming more diaconal. The big question that I think remains is: How do these shifts play out in each local setting where the people of God are called, together, to be the church? How do parishes and congregations embed this vision of their identity in the content, methods, and structures of their institutional life? And what resources do they need, from one another, from institutions of learning, and from structures of governance, to do that work well?