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The Diaconate in the Anglican and Lutheran Traditions: An Anglican Perspective

Michael Jackson¹

The Anglican and Lutheran Churches have similar views of *diakonia* and the diaconal church. Its vocation is “mercy, healing and justice in the world, especially those living at the margins of systems and society, restoring the image of Christ who came ‘to bring good news to the poor.’”² However, the two Churches have very different approaches to the ministerial order of deacons – the diaconate. Let us explore these approaches in their historical and ecumenical context.³

Diakonia and the Diaconate

Acts 6:1–6 recounts, according to most translations, how the disciples responded to complaints from the Hellenists that “their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.” The community appointed “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to handle this task, freeing the disciples to devote themselves “to prayer and to serving the word.” The apostles prayed over and laid hands on the Seven. There is a widespread assumption that they were the first deacons. But most scholars agree that the accounts of the ministry of Stephen and Philip in Acts and the commissioning of the Seven do *not* refer to a distinct order of deacons. The passage in Acts may well refer to the apostolic ministry of word and Eucharist, not literally waiting on table. The notion that the Seven were deacons began with Irenaeus (c. 185), who retrospectively identified Stephen as the first deacon. This misinterpretation of Acts 6 has had major repercussions throughout the centuries.

The biblical Greek word *diakonia* is usually translated as “service,” with connotations of humble assistance to others. However, the New Testament scholar John Collins has challenged this interpretation. *Diakonia*, he points out, had a much broader sense than “service” in New Testament Greek, also including “ministry,” “message,” “agency,” or “attendant.” The translation of this rich and complex term is so challenging that Canadian Anglican deacon and writer Maylanne Maybee prefers not to translate it.⁴ Similarly, the office of deacon, from the Greek word *diakonos*, has often been interpreted – thanks to Acts 6 – as a servant focusing on charitable work, whereas it originally had wider meanings of minister, agent, messenger, ambassador, envoy, and representative.

In the two centuries before the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, deacons were important ministers of the Church; theirs was a complementary order, not a subordinate one. People

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² *The Iona Report: The Diaconate in the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto: The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2016), 20.

³ For a more detailed study, see D. Michael Jackson, *The Diaconate Renewed: Sacrament, Word, and Service*, Diocese of Qu’Appelle, Anglican Church of Canada, 2021, <https://quappelle.anglican.ca/ministry/diaconate>.

⁴ “When I talk about the ministry of deacons, I prefer to stay with the Greek word *diakonia* because I do not think we have settled yet on a definitive English translation.” Maylanne Maybee, “The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective,” in *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice*, ed. D. Michael Jackson (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2019), 137.

were ordained directly to the episcopate, the presbyterate, or the diaconate, with all three seen as permanent. The deacon's special relationship with the bishop was and is symbolized in the diaconal ordination rite, where the bishop alone lays hands on the ordinand, whereas the college of priests join the bishop in the laying-on of hands for the presbyterate. Deacons had major liturgical roles and administrative and charitable duties. They acted as administrative assistants to the bishop. They baptized. They had clear functions in the Eucharist. They were sometimes placed in charge of small congregations. Some were elected bishops.

After the Council of Nicaea, however, the presbyterate took centre stage and the diaconate went into a long decline. In the Eastern rites its functions became mainly liturgical in nature. By the later medieval era the Latin or Roman rite had relegated the diaconate to a stepping-stone to the priesthood, which effectively marginalized the order for a thousand years. It was not until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s that the Roman Catholic Church revived the diaconate as permanent ministerial order. A move towards an ecumenical convergence then began, since the Anglican Communion and other Churches, including Lutherans, were influenced by Vatican II in looking anew at the order of deacons.

The current ecumenical context can be viewed as a continuum, a range of emphases. At one end of the spectrum would be the deacon as a liturgical functionary; at the other end, the deacon as an ecclesiastical social worker. The Eastern rites would be at the liturgical end of the spectrum, followed by Roman Catholics; the Reformed Churches would be at the social work end, followed by Lutherans. As usual, Anglicans would be somewhere in the middle! This is, of course, an over-simplification. The diaconate is undergoing a substantial process of change, and the two ends of the spectrum are moving towards each other. We appear to be arriving at an ecumenical consensus, starting with the premise that the diaconate is now recognized by most Churches, episcopal and non-episcopal, as an integral part of their ecclesiology.

How is this consensus emerging? First, the churches at the liturgical end of the spectrum are rediscovering the deacon's prophetic ministry of justice; the Lutheran and Reformed model is having a positive influence on these churches. Second, the churches near the other end of the continuum have been moving towards the ecclesiological, sacramental, and liturgical traditions of the historic episcopal churches. More and more, they are recognizing the diaconate as an *ordained* ministry rather than a commissioned one.

The Transitional Diaconate

The early Church practised "direct" ordination to all three orders of ministry: deacon, presbyter, and bishop. This started unravelling after the Council of Nicaea as "sequential" ordination gradually replaced it – to become a priest you first had to be ordained deacon; to be a bishop you had first to be ordained deacon, then priest. The diaconate was relegated to a brief, pro-forma, transitional interval on the way to sacerdotal ordination – an "inferior office," to quote the title of a book by British historian Francis Young.⁵ This was compounded by the subsequent, retrospective interpretation of sequential ordination as *cumulative* – the theory that each of the "superior" orders incorporates the others within it, so that a priest is also a deacon and a bishop is also a priest and a deacon. These practices marginalize the diaconate as an order with its own integrity.

⁵ Francis Young, *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015).

However, we can still move forward to a consensus. If, due to historical tradition and ecclesiastical inertia, Anglicans continue *sequential* ordination, then we can at least drop its *cumulative* interpretation. When transitional deacons are ordained priests, they leave the order of deacons, although, like all ministers, they maintain their baptismal *diakonia*. Then we can focus on a “full and equal” order of deacons.⁶ The Lutheran Churches do not have a transitional diaconate: deacons are deacons, and that is that! Anglicans should pay heed to the Lutheran practice.

Lutherans and Anglicans

What strikes Anglicans is the great variety of the diaconate in the Lutheran Churches. Indeed, Lutheran diaconal ministers Anne Keffer and E. Louise Williams entitle a book chapter “Diaconates [*plural*] – The Lutheran Experience.”⁷ Practices differ considerably between the national churches: in some of them, deacons are ordained as part of a threefold ministry, in others they are commissioned; in some, deacons have parish and liturgical functions, in others they are primarily involved in social service.

Lutherans generally did not preserve an ordained diaconate at the Reformation, but they commissioned deaconesses in nineteenth-century Germany. When the German Lutheran Churches revived the diaconate through the ministry of deaconesses, they did so with the humble service connotation of *diakonia* as their guiding principle. In so doing, Lutheranism gave a major impetus to the renewal of the diaconate and especially its dimension of service to others.

The 1996 *Hanover Report* of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission examined the diaconate from the point of view of the two Churches. The report noted that “‘Deacon’ in most Lutheran traditions refers to a person consecrated or commissioned to a ministry focused on parish work or social service, but not ordained.”⁸ However, it added that some Lutheran churches were actively reconsidering the ordained diaconate.

In the Church of Sweden, the situation is different: there is a permanent, ordained diaconate as part of a threefold ministry – but no transitional diaconate. The Church of Sweden’s official website, in a very Anglican way, emphasizes that, at the Reformation, the Church retained the historic episcopate and the orders of bishops, priests, and deacons. It notes that in the nineteenth century, “several deaconess institutions were founded in Sweden on the German model. The deaconesses were bound by vows to a motherhouse, and to a life of celibacy and poverty. Around 1900, men were admitted to the diaconate.”⁹ In the 1960s the celibacy and motherhouse requirements were dropped. Today, says the website, “a deacon (deaconess) visits, helps, and supports those in bodily or spiritual need; gives Christian nurture and teaching in the faith; is a sign of merciful kindness in the parish and society at large, and in all things serves Christ in the neighbour.”¹⁰ Deacons in the Swedish

⁶ James M. Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*. (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995).

⁷ Anne Keffer and E. Louise Williams, “Diaconates – The Lutheran Experience,” in *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice*, ed. D. Michael Jackson (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2019), 113–31.

⁸ *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity: The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission* (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996), 14.

https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102181/the_hanover_report.pdf

⁹ “Ministry and Ministries,” Svenska Kyrkan, last updated November 9, 2021,

<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/ministry-and-ministries>.

¹⁰ “Ministry and Ministries.”

church were traditionally engaged in social ministry, latterly as complementary to the state system, but in recent decades they have also developed teaching and liturgical roles.

In 1993, the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) rejected an ordained diaconate, saying it was not the Reformation tradition, despite the example of the Church of Sweden, and established instead a ministry of lay diaconal ministers. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) also did not have an ordained diaconate, yet Lutheran deaconesses who shared in a gathering of Canadian Anglican deacons in Winnipeg in 2000 affirmed that the difference between their commissioning rite and the ordination of pastors was almost imperceptible.

In Anglican-Lutheran dialogue at both the international and Canadian levels there has been interest on the Lutheran side in the diaconate as part of a three-fold ordained ministry. On the other hand, given their own ambivalence regarding the diaconate, Anglicans have scarcely been in a position to instruct Lutherans on the subject. As the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission politely noted in *The Hanover Report*, “Anglican churches are challenged to restore to the diaconate ... its character as a lifelong and distinct form of ordained ministry, including with its liturgical function a pastoral focus on *caritas* and *justitia* in church and society.”¹¹

The *Porvoo Agreement*, concluded in 1996 between most Nordic Lutheran Churches and the Anglican Churches of the British Isles, leading to the Porvoo Communion, stated that they would “welcome persons episcopally ordained in any of our churches to the office of bishop, priest or deacon to serve ... in that ministry in the receiving church without reordination and work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry.”¹² Consultations between the Porvoo partners have shown a wide measure of convergence on the diaconate: these occurred in London, 2006; Oslo, 2009; and Dublin, 2013. The latter issued a statement, *Diaconal Ministry as a Proclamation of the Gospel*.¹³

A major report by the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *To Love and Serve the Lord: Diakonia in the Life of the Church*,¹⁴ appeared in 2012. Known as the “Jerusalem Report” after the location of the Commission’s meeting in 2011, the document focused on the understanding and practice of *diakonia* in the two Communion rather than on the diaconate as such. For this, it deferred to and liberally quoted from the *Hanover Report* issued by its predecessor Commission sixteen years earlier. The *Jerusalem Report* stated that for both Lutherans and Anglicans *diakonia* is a “shared imperative”¹⁵ crucial to the prophetic mission of the Church – reconciliation, healing, the alleviation of poverty, and the struggle against injustice and oppression. Its final chapter, “Diakonia and Ministry,” explores how the deacon can, through servant leadership, promote and facilitate the *diakonia* of the whole

¹¹ *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, 22.

¹² Porvoo Common Statement, 1992, 22, https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102178/porvoo_common_statement.pdf

¹³ Accessed at http://www.lutheranchurch.co.uk/userfiles/file/Communique_Dublin03.pdf. At this conference, Kjell Nordstokke gave a paper with the identical title, “Diakonia as a Proclamation of the Gospel,” <https://vid.brage.unit.no/vid-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2425387/diaconalministryasaProclamationof.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹⁴ *To Love and Serve the Lord: Diakonia in the Life of the Church; The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission (ALIC III)* (Geneva and London: Lutheran World Federation and Anglican Communion, 2012).

¹⁵ *To Love and Serve the Lord*, 9–10.

Church. The report's conclusion called for recognition that "the *diakonia* of the whole Church is focused and channeled through the ministry of deacons and diaconal ministers."¹⁶

Subsequently, in the context of ecumenical dialogue, major developments occurred in the ELCIC and the ELCA, both in full communion with their Anglican/Episcopal counterparts. In 2019 the ELCIC national synod adopted a motion that the church "recognizes that 'ordination' is the rite which marks and celebrates the acceptance of a first call into public ministry of a deacon, or a bishop or a pastor."¹⁷ The ELCA decided at its 2016 Churchwide Assembly to combine its three lay "rosters" – associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers – into one roster of ministers of Word and Service called deacons. In 2019 the Assembly approved a report by its Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommending "the use of *ordination* as the rite of setting apart both ministers of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service."¹⁸ The ELCA report is notable for its ecumenical tone. Deacons, it affirms, "proclaim the Word of God to the world and interpret the needs of the world to the church in ways that equip the baptized in their vocation of loving and serving their neighbor."¹⁹ "The service of the deacon has been rooted in the worship of the church."²⁰ The report goes on to specify the liturgical functions of the deacon in terms immediately familiar to the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern traditions:

By virtue of their vocation, ... deacons are distinctively positioned to contribute to the worshiping leadership of the Christian assembly. For example, in leading the intercessions and in preaching, deacons speak the needs of the world to the church, invite the assembly to join in prayer for those who suffer, and call upon those gathered to go out to serve. A deacon reading the gospel lesson traditionally has exemplified the close relationship between what God's people believe and how they serve. Welcoming reclaimed liturgical roles for deacons works in mutuality with the increased roles lay persons have assumed in worship leadership. Deacons, for example, may be among those who take on the roles of assisting minister, those serving communion in the assembly or those carrying the communion to those who cannot be present.²¹

The ministry of the deacon is "distinct from, alongside and in mutual complementarity with the ministries of pastors."²² The same report noted that the Lutheran Churches in Germany, Sweden, Brazil, Estonia, Iceland, and Indonesia ordained deacons. The addition of the two North American churches has given a major impetus to the diaconate in Lutheranism.

Anglicans and Lutherans in Canada

Canadian Anglican observers of the diaconate note three major differences from our Lutheran counterparts. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada has very few deacons;

¹⁶ *To Love and Serve the Lord*, 40.

¹⁷ ELCIC, *Orders of Ministry; Refinements to ELCIC Polity and Policy*, CC-2019-16, July 2019, <https://elcic.ca/faithorderdoctrine/OrdersofMinistry.cfm>

¹⁸ *Report and Recommendations of the Entrance Rite Discernment Group* (Chicago: ELCA, 2019), 1, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ERDG_Recommendation.pdf.

¹⁹ *Report and Recommendations*, 3.

²⁰ *Report and Recommendations*, 4.

²¹ *Report and Recommendations*, 4.

²² *Report and Recommendations*, 3.

they are stipendiary—that is, employed by the Church; and they appear to have little or no connection to local congregations. Most Anglican deacons in Canada and the United States are non-stipendiary: they earn their living elsewhere and do their church work on a volunteer basis. Deacons in the ELCIC, by contrast, are “rostered” ministers like pastors. They take seminary training, and they are mostly employed by the Church.

There are pros and cons to both patterns. The Lutheran practice of seminary training and church employment means that deacons are better prepared and the diaconate is more professional. And there is no question of confusion and overlap between the roles of deacons and pastors. It would be an asset to Anglicans if there were more deacons employed by the Church, contributing a diaconal perspective and countering the notion that the only “real” ministers are priests. On the other hand, the potential of the diaconate in the ELCIC has been restricted – after all, there are only thirty Lutheran diaconal ministers in Canada, whereas there are 460 Anglican deacons. A non-stipendiary option might encourage more diaconal vocations and expand the scope of the Lutheran diaconate.

A weakness of the Anglican model is a lack of rigour in assessment and formation. There are no consistent standards of assessment, education, and training between the dioceses. Some have exacting, multi-year formation programs after a careful screening of candidates; others are informal, almost casual, leading to concerns that unsuitable people are sometimes allowed to proceed to ordination. There is confusion between the transitional and vocational diaconates.

On the other hand, the Anglican practice of locally-ordained deacons has the advantage of flexibility, allowing those who believe they are called to diaconal ministry to pursue their vocation to ordination and create a wider diaconal presence in the ecclesial community. Deacons who earn their living outside the church exemplify a particular dimension of *diakonia*, the link between the gathered Christian community and society beyond it. The deacon is to bring the needs and concerns of the world to the attention of the Christian community, just as she or he is to carry forward into the world the message and practice of Christian service. This “bridging” role is at the heart of the ministry of the deacon.

A corollary, in my view, is that deacons should have a base in a parish or congregation. To reprise the words of the *Jerusalem Report*, “the *diakonia* of the whole Church is focused and channeled through the ministry of deacons and diaconal ministers.”²³ The deacon should thus be visible and recognized in the ecclesial community to which he or she belongs. This means involvement in local church activities, such as outreach, pastoral care, governance, and worship. The Lutheran diaconate would, I believe, be enriched and enhanced by such a connection. Most Anglican deacons, for example, find that one highlight of their ministry is fulfilling their roles in the eucharistic liturgy. As the 2019 ELCA report said, “The service of the deacon has been rooted in the worship of the church.”²⁴

Anglicans and Lutherans in Canada continue to have diverging views of the diaconate. But there is potential for both to learn from each other and move towards a convergence similar to the one they already enjoy on *diakonia*.

²³ *To Love and Serve the Lord*, 40.

²⁴ *Report and Recommendations*, 4. See also D. Michael Jackson, *The Deacon in the Worshipping Community: Liturgy and the Diaconate*, Diocese of Qu’Appelle, Anglican Church of Canada, 2021, <https://quappelle.anglican.ca/ministry/diaconate>.