

Report and Recommendations of the Entrance Rite Discernment Group

Background

From 1993 through 2016, the ELCA maintained four public ministry rosters: the roster of ordained ministers and three official rosters of laypersons – associates in ministry, deaconesses and diaconal ministers. Beginning in 2007, regional consultations, study and dialogue examined the work and ministry of the three lay rosters, and these conversations eventually led to a Word and Service Task Force, convened in response to Church Council action [CC10.11.64] taken in November 2010.

The Word and Service Task Force recognized and affirmed the essential value of diaconal service to the mission of the people of God in the ELCA. Through its work, the task force came to an understanding that this calling would be strengthened by the convergence of the three former lay rosters of the ELCA into a single redefined roster. Based on the recommendation of the Word and Service Task Force, the 2016 Churchwide Assembly authorized the establishment of a roster of Ministers of Word and Service, called deacons, effective Jan. 1, 2017 [CA16.05.11]. The assembly also endorsed the recommendation that the rite of consecration be used as the entrance rite for this new roster during an interim period of additional study, since two of the three rosters that combined to form the new roster of Ministers of Word and Service had used consecration as their entrance rite [CA16.05.11].

Early in its work, the Word and Service Task Force recommended that the question of a permanent entrance rite for this new roster be considered separately. The Church Council authorized an Entrance Rite Discernment Group [CC13.11.65] to consider this question and to bring a recommendation to the Church Council for action by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. Subsequently, the Church Council, responding to memorials offered at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly, also requested that the Entrance Rite Discernment Group provide recommendations on appropriate diaconal symbols and whether or not the constitutional language on representational principles [5.01.f.] should be altered.

Recommendation for the Rite:

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends the use of *ordination* as the rite of setting apart both ministers of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service.

Rationale: Theology and Practice

Baptism establishes our Christian identity. Through baptism, each Christian is called to a life of loving service in response to God's gift of grace.

Throughout the life of the church, some persons have been called to live out that loving service as a diaconal minister or deacon. While that diaconal ministry has taken many forms through the history of the church, it has always been marked by a call to service. As the *Occasional Services for the Assembly* companion volume to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* notes, "Those called to the diaconate speak God's word to God's world, and in turn they speak also for the needs of God's world to the church."¹

The church historically has set apart such persons through a public rite for this ministry. By doing so, it does not confer a higher status upon these persons than baptism does, but rather witnesses that some individuals are called and appointed to specific public ministry. All deacons on the roster of the ELCA, wherever they serve in the church and the world, are responsible to empower, equip and encourage the whole people of God for their own daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation.²

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Occasional Services for the Assembly* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 200, cited in Gordon W. Lathrop, "Diaconal Ministry: The Entrance Rite Question Reflections from a Consideration of Symbolic Meaning and Ritual Practice," 1. Word and Service Roster, last modified March 2017, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Diaconal_Ministry_Entrance_Rite_Question.pdf.

² "Report and Recommendations of the Word and Service Task Force." *ELCA 2016 Pre-Assembly Report*, ELCA, 2016, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.guidebook.com/upload/p8aWh9vqY2iSfM4NcXE63BHJ5PwCQxn7/zOMeYy5N2y0TCZV6p5L4tOYjIqzI6Z5xocYg.pdf>.

Since 2014, the Entrance Rite Discernment Group has studied the history and theology of ordination and consecration, the history and theology of *diakonia*, liturgical materials, and the practices of our global and ecumenical partners.

The New Testament does not present a single theology of a rite called ordination. Instead, it describes a pattern of the church setting individuals apart for specific leadership roles through the laying on of hands with prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit.³

The central actions in the rites named ordination, consecration and commissioning in this church are the laying on of hands with prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, along with a charge to and promises by the candidate. While there are slight differences in the wording of the *current* rites, the intention is the same: to set persons apart for public ministry on behalf of the church.

North American Lutherans have typically limited the rite of ordination to ministers of Word and Sacrament, called pastors, and have especially associated ordination and inclusion on the ordained roster with the authorization to preside over the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This narrow usage of the term, however, is not common among our ecumenical partners or among global Lutheran churches.

The final report of the 2005 Lutheran World Federation consultation on *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church* recommended ordination for diaconal ministers in order to “reflect that the diaconal ministry is an integral part of the one ecclesial ministry. Through the act of ordination the church recognizes the ministry of the deacon and prays to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ At the same time, the statement also affirms the “‘deaconhood of all believers’; that is, the calling of all the baptized to be involved in *diakonia*.” It also points to the importance of “seeing the diaconal and pastoral ministries as mutual and complementary, while having different emphases.”⁵

Many churches throughout the global Lutheran community ordain deacons, including the Lutheran churches in Germany, Sweden, Brazil, Estonia, Iceland and Indonesia. In addition, many of our six full communion partners use the term *ordination* to set apart deacons for public leadership roles in the church. Both The United Methodist Church and The Episcopal Church, the two partner churches with deacons whose roles roughly parallel those in the ELCA, ordain deacons. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Reformed Church in America ordain deacons who hold primary duties in ministries of service and compassion. In the United Church of Christ, congregations may choose to ordain deacons and other leaders for service in the congregation only, while the Moravian Church in America ordains its deacons as one of the three traditional orders of ministry (deacon, presbyter, bishop).⁶

Recognizing that deacons and pastors are both engaged in ministries that are essential to the life of the church and its work in the world, the Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends the consistent use of ordination as the rite of setting apart both ministers of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service.

Rationale: Roles and Responsibilities

The ELCA constitution (7.20. and 7.50.) specifies the distinctive roles and responsibilities of those on each roster. Pastors hold primary responsibility for preaching the word, administering the

³ Mark Oldenburg, "Initiatory Rituals for Public Ministry," 1-2, Word and Service Roster, last modified March 2017, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Initiatory_Rituals_for_Public_Ministry.pdf.

⁴ "The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches," in *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church*, ed. Reinhard Boettcher, LWF Studies 2006 (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 2006), 85.

⁵ E. Louise Williams, "Ecumenical and Global Perspectives on the Diaconate," 4. Word and Service Roster, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Ecumenical_and_Global_Perspectives.pdf.

⁶ For further examples and discussion, see William Gafkjen, "Here a Deacon, There a Deacon, Everywhere a Deacon, Deacon," Word and Service Roster, last modified July 2014, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Deacon_Descriptions.pdf.

sacraments, conducting public worship and providing pastoral care (7.31.02.). Deacons live out a life of prophetic *diakonia* that gives particular attention to the suffering places in God's world, equip the baptized for ministry in God's world in ways that affirm the gifts of all people, and are grounded in a gathered community for ongoing diaconal formation (7.61.02.). Those called as deacons thus 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 the neighbor. Both rosters share in the responsibility to share knowledge of the ELCA and its wider work, to identify and encourage qualified persons to prepare for the ministry of the gospel, and to speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world (7.31.02. and 7.61.02.).

Whether one serves as a pastor or a deacon, ordination affirms the call of the church, commits the individual to carry out faithfully their responsibilities, and affirms the commitment of the church to accompany and support these ministers as they live out their public ministry. In addition, the term ordination is easily recognizable by, and can strengthen our conversation and collaboration with, our global and ecumenical partners.

Those previously commissioned or consecrated already have been entranced into the ministry of Word and Service. Ordination, commissioning and consecration are all valid and appropriate "entrance rites" for those beginning public ministry in the church. Since those already on the roster of Ministers of Word and Service have "entered" the roster, no further rite is necessary. In addition, all rostered deacons, both those already on the roster and those who will enter in the future, may rightly use the symbols recommended.

Whatever their particular role or context – whether deeply engaged in proclamation and service in nonecclesial contexts or serving in congregational or other "church" settings – every rostered deacon of the ELCA has a twofold focus to serve the neighbor and to empower, equip and encourage the people of God for their daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation. This ministry is understood to be "distinct from, alongside and in mutual complementarity with the ministries of pastors of the ELCA."⁷

The recommendation reflects a belief that a renewed diaconal ministry, designed to stand alongside the ministry of Word and Sacrament, will enhance this church's ability better to realize its mission today. "Such a diaconal ministry is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related and missionally driven."⁸

Recommendation regarding "Representational Principles"

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends that, for all purposes related to the implementation of the "representational principles" of this church, neither ministers of Word and Sacrament nor Word and Service be included in the category of "laypersons."

Rationale

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group affirms the importance of allowing laypersons significant participation in the decision-making processes of this church, particularly as manifested by provision 5.01.g., which states that "at least 60 percent of the members of its assemblies, councils, committees, boards, and other organizational units shall be laypersons." Because pastors and deacons are *rostered* ministers of this church, the Discernment Group recommends they be counted together. We encourage all entities within this church, including synods, to establish processes that will ensure that both deacons and pastors are included in leadership positions appropriate to their contexts.

⁷ Gafkjen, 2.

⁸ Duane Larson, "A Theology for One Lutheran Diaconate in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," 6. Word and Service Roster, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Theology_One_Lutheran_Diaconate.pdf. Larson's essay contains a more expansive theological discussion of this topic.

Recommendation for Appropriate Symbols of the Roster

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends that the entrance rite for ministers of Word and Service include the presentation of both a deacon's stole and a cross.

Rationale

Deacons in the ELCA serve in widely varying ways. They may serve in the ministries of a congregation, synod or churchwide expression in areas such as teaching, administration, music or service, or they may serve in social-service agencies or other ministries in the world. Historically, however, whatever their specific ministry, the service of the deacon has been rooted in the worship of the church.

All Christians are fed through the word and sacraments of the Christian assembly and are thus strengthened for all dimensions of their vocational faithfulness, including their service in the world. For much of Christian history, deacons held important liturgical responsibilities in this worship.

The World Council of Churches' document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) notes that, in particular, "by struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life."⁹ Deacons are called to "give particular attention to the suffering places in God's world; speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world; and equip the baptized for ministry in God's world that affirms the gifts of all people."¹⁰

By virtue of their vocation, therefore, 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 as part of 20th-century liturgical renewal. 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. With the formation of the Roster of Ministers of Word and Service, congregations may want to explore again ways appropriately to involve deacons and lay people together in roles of worship leadership, providing yet another opportunity to highlight the intersections of church and world, while also honoring both ancient and contemporary practice. While deacons live out their connections with the worshiping assembly in diverse ways, that relationship is essential to the understanding and witness of the deacon as public leader of the church.¹¹

Especially when leading worship, deacons may wear a diaconal stole. The deacons' stole is widely recognized ecumenically as a symbol of the diaconate. The stole, usually worn diagonally across an alb, emphasizes the importance of connecting worship and service and identifies the deacon as a public minister of the church.

Outside the assembly's worship, the cross is an appropriate symbol as it identifies the deacon as a presence of the servant Christ in the world. The Entrance Rite Discernment Group suggests that the appropriate churchwide staff facilitate a conversation among deacons to propose a single cross design that can be worn as a pin.

⁹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1982), 27.

¹⁰ ELCA Constitution 7.61.02

¹¹ For a deeper consideration of the connection between the deacon and the worshiping community, see Lathrop.

Recommended Actions

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends that the ELCA:

1. establish the rite of ordination as the entrance rite for deacons entering the roster of Ministers of Word and Service;
2. define the symbols of this ministry as a deacon's stole and a cross, both to be presented at the entrance rite;
3. direct the worship staff of this church to develop an appropriate rite and rubrics for the ordination of deacons;
4. direct the worship staff of this church to share information about the appropriate use of the deacon stole and to facilitate a conversation among deacons regarding a unified cross design;
5. charge the secretary of this church with proposing appropriate amendments to the *Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA* that will ensure that at least 60 percent of the members of its assemblies, councils, committees, boards and other organizational units shall be persons who are not on the rosters of Ministers of Word and Service or Ministers of Word and Sacrament;
6. review the ELCA candidacy process for appropriate modifications as necessary;
7. charge the secretary of this church with considering and proposing possible amendments to the *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA* to accomplish its recommendations;
8. call upon this church to increase opportunities for lifting up, recognizing, fostering and encouraging recognition of deacons for the mission and witness of the church in the world;
9. continue funding for transition events and ongoing leadership and formation events to ensure growth and understanding of the roster of Ministers of Word and Service;
10. continue the preparation of appropriate and informative materials for the church's ongoing study; and
11. refer the resulting amending/amended documents to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly for approval as necessary.

Further Hopes and Dreams Going Forward

Diaconal ministry in its various expressions is central to the church's life and witness. The Entrance Rite Discernment Group anticipates far more than a change in governing documents is being envisioned. As Bishop William Gafkjen noted when introducing the proposal for a unified diaconal roster to the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, we are commending to the church

an 'adaptive' change ... rooted in what we believe and think about who we are and how we live and work together for the sake of God's mission in the world. [These recommendations are] about how we are equipped and called to live and serve together as God's cross-marked Spirit sealed believers, bearers and "embodiers" of good news, the best news, in a torn, tumultuous and terrified world.¹²

They are, in fact, a commitment to and hope for a renewed ministry of all the baptized, particularly as witnessed by diaconal lives.

What then do we hope and dream will be the substantive changes to our faith communities?

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group envisions a future where deacons and pastors are equally valued as leaders of the church, sharing one ministry of the gospel with distinctive and mutually complementary emphases. As we mature into a church with a strengthened diaconal leadership and more ardent diaconal witness, we also hope for a realized collegiality among all serving for the sake of the gospel, rostered and not.

¹² William Gafkjen, "Presentation: Word and Service Roster Recommendation" (unpublished typescript, Aug. 8, 2016), 2.

Consequently, this change ... will touch and transform how we understand and live into the vocation of every baptized person to follow Jesus in the way of the cross to care for and serve the neighbor, every neighbor.¹³

We envision extended leadership, in new places and contexts, and in collaboration with our full communion and other ecumenical partners, that is not only visible in communities of faith but also visible in the world.

[In 1993, the ELCA] adopted the document Together for Ministry. This fine document describes with clarity the missional movement of the church as church for the sake of the world. It lifts up the call of all the baptized to ministries of service in the world. ... We made these decisions on the front edge of the unimaginable acceleration of the changes, cultural and otherwise, that have placed parts of the body of Christ like the ELCA in unfamiliar, even precarious, positions, wondering how God is calling us to be church in new and shifting landscapes.¹⁴

We envision renewed congregational vitality expressed in outward facing communities engaged in lively mission in the world.

We envision that integrating diaconal witness and leadership more deeply into the life of this church will strengthen its diaconal commitment as an essential part of the Christian life. The life of faith is a relationship embracing both confidence in God, often manifest by creeds and confessions, and also the response to God's call expressed in every Christian's vocation.

This future will happen only if this church, in all its expressions, consciously grows into it. We pray this church will reflect on these dreams and act on these matters for the sake of the gospel witness of the church in the world.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4.