

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 the ELCA Church Council to appoint a Word and Service Task Force in 2012. [CC12.11.33].

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 directed 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 appointed 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 and Rationale 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.

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 has historically 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?_ga=2.208097814.525212187.1518102037-561441743.1518102037.

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/zOMeYy5N2y0TCZV6p5L4tQYjlqzI6Z5xocYg.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 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 local 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 ministers of word and sacrament and ministers of word and service 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.

Roles and Responsibilities

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?_ga=2.220028701.525212187.1518102037-561441743.1518102037.

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?_ga=2.209148822.525212187.1518102037-561441743.1518102037.

The ELCA Constitution (7.20 and 7.50) specifies the distinctive roles and responsibilities of those on each roster. Ministers of word and sacrament hold primary responsibility for preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, conducting public worship and providing pastoral care. (7.31.02). Ministers of word and service 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 ministers of word and service 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, 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 minister of word and sacrament or a minister of word and service, ordination confirms the individual's internal sense of call, affirms the external call of the church, commits the individual to faithfully carry out 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 already "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 and deemed most appropriate.

Whatever their particular role or context – whether deeply engaged in proclamation and service in non-ecclesial contexts or serving in congregational or other "church" settings – every rostered deacon of the ELCA has a two-fold 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 to better realize its mission today. "Such a diaconal ministry is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related and missionally driven."⁸

Recommendation and Rationale regarding "Representation Principles"

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends that for all purposes related to the implementation of the "representation principles" of this church, neither ministers of word and sacrament nor word and service be included in the category of "laypersons."

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group affirms the importance of allowing laypersons significant participation in the decision-making processes of this church, particularly as manifest by Constitution 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 ministers of word and service and ministers of word and sacrament 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?_ga=2.215007123.525212187.1518102037-561441743.1518102037. Larson's essay contains a more expansive theological discussion of this topic.

Recommendation and Rationale for Appropriate Symbols of the Roster

The Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends that the ordination rite for ministers of word and service include the presentation of a deacon's stole and a cross.

Deacons in the ELCA serve in widely varying ways. They may serve in the ministries of a congregation, synod or churchwide agency in areas such as teaching, administration, music or service, or they may serve in social services 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 their service in the world. For much of Christian history, deacons held important liturgical responsibilities in its worship life. The World Council of Church 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

Liturgical renewal in the 20th century brought a welcome re-emphasis on the participation of the laity in worship leadership, and laity now often assist in many congregations with the responsibilities formerly traditionally assigned to deacons. With the formation of the Roster of Ministers of Word and Service, congregations may wish to consider inviting deacons to serve in some capacity alongside the laity in some form of worship leadership, providing yet another opportunity to highlight the intersections of church and world, while additionally lifting up and recognizing both ancient and contemporary practice. While deacons will live out their connection with the worshipping assembly in different ways, that relationship is essential to the understanding and witness of the deacon as public leader of the church.¹⁰

Because they are called to serve in two contexts, the Entrance Rite Discernment Group recommends the use of two symbols.

Diaconal stoles are an ecumenically recognized symbol of the diaconate. The deacon's stole, worn diagonally across an alb, emphasizes the importance of connecting worship and service and emphasizes that deacons are public ministers of the church.

Outside the assembly's worship, the cross is an appropriate symbol and identifies the deacon as a presence of the servant Christ in the world. The Entrance Rite Discernment Group suggests that the appropriate ELCA staff facilitate a conversation among deacons about a unified cross design.

Recommendations

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 the ELCA to develop an appropriate rite and rubrics for the ordination of deacons;
4. direct the worship staff of the ELCA 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 to propose appropriate amendments to the Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of this church 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 word and service or word and sacrament;
6. review the ELCA Candidacy process for appropriate modifications as necessary;
7. charge the secretary to consider and propose possible amendments to the Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of this church to accomplish its recommendations;

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

¹⁰ For a deeper consideration of the connection between the deacon and the worshipping community, see Lathrop.

8. call upon this church to increase opportunities for lifting up, recognizing, fostering and encouraging recognition of the ministers of word and service 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.

Hopes and Dreams Going Forward

When introducing the proposal for a unified diaconal roster to the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, Bishop William Gafkjen noted that we were not commending to the church just a change in church governing documents but

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. It's 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.¹¹

The change in church rosters is 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 ministers of word and service and ministers of word and sacrament come to be equally valued and important in the life of the church, sharing one ministry of the gospel. 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.

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.¹²

We hope and dream for extended leadership, in new places and contexts, 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.¹³

We thus hope for renewed congregational vitality that is understood to be rooted in an outward facing community.

We hope and dream that incorporating diaconal witness and leadership will deepen this church's understanding of diaconal commitment as an essential part of faith. Faith is a relationship that is not just confidence in God, often manifest by creeds and confessions, but also commitment to God's call expressed by a way of living.

¹¹ William Gafkjen, "Presentation: Word and Service Roster Recommendation" (unpublished typescript, Aug. 8, 2016), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

This future will not just happen but will require this church to consciously grow into it. We pray this church will resolve to reflect on these matters and act on these dreams for the sake of the gospel witness of the church in the world.