



Ecumenical and global perspectives on the diaconate

By E. Louise Williams

While North American Lutherans have generally not used the word *diakonia* in its understanding of ministry, Lutherans and Christians in other places throughout the world have. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has for many years used the term *diakonia* for a wide range of ministries from individual care of people in congregations to health and social service institutions to international aid and development. The World Council of Churches (WCC), too, used *diakonia* to encompass much of its work of aid, development and advocacy, often under the heading of “Justice, Peace and the Care of Creation.” Both the LWF and the WCC see *diakonia* not as an add-on but as an essential dimension of the life of the church.

Much of the conversation within both the LWF and the WCC over the years has been about diaconal work but not the diaconate. Indeed, most of the diaconal work throughout the world is not done by deacons.ⁱ It is the whole church, all the baptized, who are called to this essential work in the world. But those who are serious about Christ’s ministry of *diakonia* for the sake of the world must explore what kind of leadership will be most helpful for this work.

In 1982, the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC published *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*. In the discussion of ministry was a call to revive the diaconate in order to better engage in mission in a changing world. And the document saw the restored diaconate as a way to express in a greater way the unity of the church. This document stimulated much discussion within churches and ecumenically. The vision was to have within the ministry of the church someone—a deacon—who could represent the whole church’s calling as servant in the world. Additionally, the liturgical roles of the deacon (for example, reading the Scriptures, preaching, leading the prayers of the people, and sending the people out to serve) would more clearly demonstrate the interdependence of worship and service in the church’s life.ⁱⁱ

As a result of these conversations, some churches, where the diaconate was only a transitional step on the way to becoming priests or pastors, established or affirmed a permanent or perpetual diaconate. The Roman Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church—USA, and some other churches in the Anglican Communion all now have ordained permanent deacons. The United Methodist Church has also discontinued the transitional diaconate in order to make the role of deacon clearer.

Other churches looked for ways to bring diaconal communities or orders that had been on the edges of the church’s life more into the center of its ministry. For example, Lutheran churches in Finland, Norway and Sweden all had deaconess and deacon communities who were very involved in diaconal work but were consecrated, not ordained, and did not usually have liturgical roles. These churches and other Lutherans in Northern Europe engaged in extensive ecumenical conversations with Anglicans in the United Kingdom. These conversations birthed ordained diaconates in several Lutheran churches with renewed involvement in congregational worship.

Still other churches established diaconates as a new form of ministry. The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) added ordained diaconal ministers to establish a fourfold ministry, which also includes pastors, evangelists and catechists. All four ministries are considered equal

in status, share the same salary scale, and require the same basic seminary education with special courses for each distinct ministry.ⁱⁱⁱ

Concurrently, there have been increased efforts to renew the understanding of the “deaconhood of all believers”^{iv} and to develop more resources to help individuals and congregations realize this aspect of their Christian calling. The IECLB, for example, established the Department of Diakonia, which encompasses the diaconal ministers, the deaconess community and all the church’s health care and social service agencies and institutions. It also has a commitment to help mobilize people in congregations to do diaconal work. The Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway require each congregation to articulate each year strategies and plans for *diakonia* as well as worship and education. The Church of Norway has written a comprehensive “Plan for Diakonia” which seeks to help congregations and individuals to be involved in diaconal work in their own contexts. That document describes diakonia as: Loving your neighbor, Creating inclusive communities, Caring for creation and Working for justice. kirken.no/nb-NO/church-of-norway/resources/plan-for-diakonia/

In preparation for their 2003 Assembly, the LWF convened a group around the theme “Prophetic Diakonia—For the Healing of the World” to explore three specific areas of human suffering—poverty, violence, and HIV and AIDS. In a letter to the churches of the LWF, the consultation reaffirmed that “diakonia is central to what it means to be church” and that it is the calling of the whole people of God.^v In the context of asserting that *diakonia* is the calling of the whole people of God, the consultation also spoke to the importance of leadership.

Leadership at all levels is essential, leaders who equip all Christians to take up their call to serve. ... Churches should initiate and strengthen education for diakonia. As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church’s ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the Church.^{vi}

In 2005, the LWF convened another consultation, *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church*, to look at existing models of ordering diaconal ministry and to try to set parameters for demarcating a “space” where diaconal ministry can be located in the overall ministry of the church.^{vii} The participants and presentations represented a wide range of churches with a variety of approaches to ordering diaconal ministry.

The consultation recognized that in some parts of the Lutheran church there was a reluctance to emphasize the diaconate because it was seen as a step toward a three-fold ministry of bishop, pastor and deacon. The consultation wanted to leave this discussion open to local contexts. Consequently, the consultation articulated the assumption that however that “space” might be understood, it should be:

- solidly based on the gospel as testified in the Bible;
- accountable to and informed by basic tenets of the Reformation; and
- open to contextual variations.

The final statement of the consultation advocated ordaining those called to this ministry as a way of demonstrating that the diaconate is an integral part of the one (public) ministry of the church. At the same time, the statement affirms the “deaconhood of all believers,” that is, the calling of all the

baptized to be involved in *diakonia*. And it pointed to the importance of seeing the diaconal and pastoral ministries as mutual and complementary, while having different emphases.

Drawing on the work of these two consultations and the mission document of 2004,^{viii} the LWF published *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment—An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia*. lutheranworld.org/content/resource-diakonia-context-transformation-reconciliation-empowerment The document states:

Diakonia grows out of worship and aims at thanksgiving to God for God's indescribable gift. ... Diakonia is a response to concrete situations of suffering, need and injustice, the fulfillment of the commandment of love, and in all that is an expression of what the Church believes in and confesses: the grace of God—for the healing of the world.

Diakonia is thus an intrinsic element of being Church and cannot be reduced to an activity by certain committed persons or made necessary by external social conditions. Diakonia is deeply related to what the Church celebrates in its liturgy and announces in its preaching. In the same way, liturgy and proclamation relate to diakonia. The communion (*koinonia*) of the Church is made visible through its three main expressions (Celebration or *leiturgia*, Proclamation or *kerygma*, and Service or *diakonia*).^{ix}

These three expressions are all interrelated and support and stimulate each other, and there is no hierarchy among them.

Diakonia in Context also emphasizes the importance of competent leadership on all levels (individual, congregational, institutional and international) in the context of the "deaconhood of all believers." It also makes a case for the diaconate as an order of ministry so that the church's leadership reflects the intrinsic dimension of *diakonia* in the life of the church. Deacons are seen as taking the lead in organizing the diaconal work of a local congregation and also having a role in its worship life. It is further suggested that consideration of an ordained diaconate not focus on the three-fold ministry but rather on what it means to be church in today's world.^x

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Describe your experience of the ministry of deacons in other denominations.
2. How might our ecumenical and global Lutheran partners inform the ELCA's understanding of deacons?
3. What does the global and ecumenical diversity suggest as we make decisions about diaconal ministry in the ELCA?
4. Describe a plan for diakonia in your context.

ⁱ I am using “deacon” to include deaconesses, diaconal ministers, deacons, etc., that is, people who are formally educated, officially set apart (by consecration, ordination or commissioning), and recognized as public ministers in the church. Diaconate refers to those who are set apart for this ministry.

ⁱⁱ See *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. World Council of Churches, Geneva 1982. Paragraph 31 and attached commentary. oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text A study guide to BEM is also available oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/youth/study-guide-on-baptism-eucharist-and-ministry.

ⁱⁱⁱ More information can be found on the IELCB website, but unfortunately most of this information is in Portuguese. luteranos.com.br/ Sr. Ruthild Brakemier’s presentation to the LWF consultation on Diaconal Ministries in the Lutheran Churches gives history and background. *The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church*, 2006.

^{iv} This phrase is used in some LWF documents to highlight the diaconal calling of all the baptized and corresponds to “the priesthood of all believers.”

^v The Lutheran World Federation, A Letter from the Global Consultation “Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World,” 7 November 2002. p.2.

^{vi} Ibid, p.5

^{vii} Some of the presentations and reports from that consultation were published in 2005 as an LWF Studies monograph of the same title. It is not available in digital format at this time.

^{viii} *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission*. Geneva. 2004

^{ix} *Diakonia in Context*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, p. 29.

^x Ibid, pp. 71ff.