



Frequently asked questions

Word and Service Entrance Rite Discernment Group

January 2018

1. **Why and how do we set people apart for public ministry, and what does that setting apart mean for the “priesthood of all believers”? What makes a called and set apart leader different from lay members of the body of Christ?**

“The grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ means that all the baptized, as members of the universal priesthood of believers, are called to a vocation of mission in their daily lives. Members of this priesthood are gifted, enabled and called to active participation in God’s mission, both in their faith communities and in the world.” (ELCA Candidacy Manual, p. 8) All the baptized are called into a life of ministry and vocation at their baptism.

While all Christians are called to ministry by virtue of their baptisms, some are called and “set apart” by the church to specific public leadership. Those called to the office of word and sacrament proclaim the word of God within the gathered community and preside at the table for the sake of the gospel. Those called to the office of word and service proclaim the word of God to the world and the world to the church in ways that equip the baptized in their vocation of loving the neighbor.

A person called to public ministry is not more holy or sacred than another; through communal discernment, they have discerned a call to a vocation that requires mutual accountability in and with the church.

2. **What did Martin Luther say about the diaconate?**

By Martin Luther’s day, the office of deacon in the Roman Catholic Church served primarily as a transitional stepping-stone on the way to the priesthood. Deacons held responsibilities for some elements of liturgical leadership but not for service to the poor. By the 16th century, monastics, not deacons, had long assumed the role as chief dispensers of charity in the local community. When the Reformation brought an end to monastic orders in the new Protestant churches, it unintentionally caused disruption to the organized charity system of Western Europe.

Partially to address this need, Luther proposed that the diaconate return to its ancient roots. Not only would such a re-establishment of the diaconate free pastors to concentrate on preaching the word of God and administering the sacraments, argued Luther, it would also return the office to something closer to what he understood as its original intent. He wrote: “The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel and the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the

church's aid to the poor, so that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. For this was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts." (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520).

3. What language do our global Lutheran partners use for setting apart those in diaconal ministry?

Many of our global Lutheran partners have studied questions related to the ministry of deacons in recent decades. In 2002, a group convened by The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) around the theme "Prophetic Diakonia—For the Healing of the World" affirmed that *diakonia* is central to what it means to be church. The group's report concluded: "As a ministry, (*diakonia*) 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."

The LWF convened another consultation in 2005 titled "The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church." The final statement of the consultation advocated for 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.

The document *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment—An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia* was published in 2009 and advocates for churches to re-examine how they order ministry and to include the diaconate in their public expression of ministry in ways that are appropriate for their context.

It would be difficult to examine all those contexts here and to explain all the nuances of language and culture around the world; we provide some diverse examples from our global Lutheran partners.

- **Brazil**—Since 1992, The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil has ordained diaconal ministers as one of four ordained ministries. The others are pastors, catechists and evangelists.
- **Canada**—The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada sets apart diaconal ministers through a rite of consecration.
- **Estonia**—The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church counts deacons as one of three orders of the one ordained ministry of the church.

- **Germany**—The Lutheran churches in Germany ordains deacons (both men and women). There are still communities or sisterhoods of deaconesses who use consecration as their entrance rite.
- **Iceland**—The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland has prepared and ordained deacons since 1993.
- **Indonesia**—The Huria Kristen Batak Protestant has ordained deaconesses since 1983.
- **Norway**—The liturgical rite authorizing deacons in the Church of Norway uses a Norwegian word that does not correspond with ordination or consecration but is a more general term to include authorization of all orders of ministry—priest, deacon, bishop.
- **Sweden**—The Church of Sweden ordains deacons.
- **Tanzania**—Several dioceses of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania have deaconesses who are consecrated.

4. **What language do our ecumenical partners use for setting apart those in diaconal ministry?**

The ELCA is in full-communion with six partner churches. While each of these churches uses the term “deacon” to describe those who focus in some way on ministries of service, only the United Methodist and Episcopal churches have deacons who are understood as roughly parallel to those in the ELCA. Each church defines the ministry of deacons in different ways and has its own practices of preparation and entrance into that ministry.

- In **The United Methodist Church**, deacons are considered ordained United Methodist clergy.
- **The Episcopal Church** ordains deacons. The Episcopal Church has roles for both permanent deacons and “transitional” deacons, who are serving as deacons temporarily before entering into the priesthood.
- The **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)** ordains deacons, who hold primary responsibility for the church’s “ministry of compassion.”
- Congregations of the **Reformed Church in America** elect and ordain deacons who lead the congregation in “ministries of mercy, justice, service and outreach.”

- In the **United Church of Christ**, deacons are laypeople elected by their congregation. Local churches may ordain deacons and other leaders for service in the local congregation only.
- The **Moravian Church in America** ordains deacons as one of the three traditional orders of ministry (deacon, presbyter, bishop). One first serves as a deacon for three to five years before becoming a presbyter.

5. Why would a community decide to call a rostered deacon?

Deacons are distinctive in their formation and vocational identity, so that they understand their work to embody public witness to the place of *diakonia* in the church's life:

- they are formed to prepare, inspire and lead the entire community they serve in its ministry of service;
- they are supported by and accountable to churchwide standards and commitments, as well as to synod and local accountabilities in the place they serve; and
- they have responsibility and opportunity for broader engagement in ecumenical ministerial and ecclesial relationships.

6. Do deacons have a role in liturgy as a worship leader?

As early as the second century, deacons assumed certain liturgical duties in worship, although the specific functions varied greatly over time and place. These wide-ranging responsibilities included assistance in the administration of the Eucharist and in baptisms, taking the Eucharist to those absent from the service, and even preaching. Deacons also read the Epistle and Gospel, made announcements, gave instructions during the liturgy, presented the offertory, led bidding prayers, and dismissed the congregation at the end of the service. Almost 2,000 years later, many of these duties remain an important part of the deacon's responsibilities in some Christian traditions.

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 conducted by deacons. With the formation of the new deacon roster, congregations may wish to consider inviting deacons to serve 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.

7. If this church chooses to ordain deacons, does that mean that deacons could preside over the sacraments and other rites of the church, such as weddings and funerals?

The ministry of word and sacrament and the ministry of word and service are distinct offices with different and yet complementary calls and responsibilities. Those called and ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament proclaim the word of God within the gathered community, baptize, and preside at the table for the sake of the gospel. Those called and consecrated or ordained to the ministry of word and service proclaim the word of God to the world and the world to the church in ways that equip the baptized in their vocation of loving the neighbor.

As stated in the constitution of the ELCA, ministers of word and sacrament “administer the sacraments (C.9.03.a.2).” Thus, deacons do not hold that responsibility. Since Christian marriage is not understood to be a sacrament but rather a rite of the church closely connected to the civil realm, state laws define who may preside at weddings. These laws vary greatly from state to state.

Funerals provide the Christian community, having been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, an opportunity to express its faith and hope in the face of death. While there are no specific guidelines as to who may preside at a funeral apart from presidency at the sacrament of Holy Communion, pastors “conduct public worship” (C.9.03. a.3) and “bury the dead” (c.9.03.b.1) Since both pastors and deacons are called to proclaim the word of God, and both pastors and deacons have traditionally served leadership roles in the community’s liturgy, it may be appropriate for pastors and/or deacons to preside at funerals depending upon the circumstances and community’s understanding.

8. Do the synods offer compensation guidelines for ministers of word and service as they do for ministers of word and sacrament?

A survey of synods reveals that 94 percent of the synods responding do have compensation guidelines for ministers of word and service. These guidelines vary by geographic region, as do the guidelines for ministers of word and sacrament. Because ministers of word and sacrament are eligible for a housing allowance, the guidelines vary between the two rosters in the majority of synods. Twelve percent of the synods are utilizing the same guidelines for the two rosters.

9. Will there be tax implications if we were to ordain deacons?

The current answer to the question is no—changing an entrance rite does not have tax implications. However, tax laws are always changing, being reinterpreted, and applied to differing circumstance, such that any definite answer today could soon be overruled in the legislature or the courts tomorrow. Additionally, whether a change in the entrance rite might have an effect on the application of federal tax laws to deacons should never be a factor in the decision to change the rite. Selection of the appropriate religious rite is a matter for the church, based upon doctrine, tradition and other ecclesiastical judgments,

not on whether certain individuals may benefit or be burdened by the tax code. Based upon what functions the ministers of word and service, as a group, are expected to perform, ordaining them will not change their status under the Internal Revenue Code relative to the housing allowance or the Self-Employment Contributions Act.

10. If ordination is recommended as the appropriate entrance rite for ministers of word and service, will those currently rostered be ordained?

No. Those already commissioned or consecrated have already been entranced into the ministry of word and service. Ordination, commissioning and consecration are all valid and appropriate “entrance rites” for those entering into 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. All deacons, both those already on the roster and those who will enter in the future, may rightly utilize the symbols recommended and deemed most appropriate.