

INITIATORY RITUALS FOR PUBLIC MINISTRY  
Mark Oldenburg  
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The task I was assigned was to describe some of the range of ways the church has set people apart for public ministry and to distill some themes from those practices that might be useful for the group's task. Obviously, a full investigation of these practices is beyond the scope of a short presentation. My means, therefore, will be paradigmatic and anecdotal; I'll try to pick out some particular practices that seem to offer some of the most useful thematic distillations.

I have intentionally omitted several possibilities from consideration. Some, like presbyteral ordinations, consecration of deaconesses and diaconal ministers, and commissioning of associates in ministry in the ELCA, are no doubt already very familiar to the group. Others, such as royal coronations, commissioning of missionaries, and investment with offices in congregations, are simply too large or diverse to investigate. Of those thousands that are left, I have chosen six to describe.

The first is a natural, the setting apart of the Seven in Acts 6. Luke describes the burgeoning Christian community in Jerusalem and implies that it is already strained by ethnic rifts and rather docetic leaders. Widows from the Greek-speaking Jewish community, cut off from family support by the excommunication of the Christians, are not being cared for, and the Twelve claim to be too busy praying and teaching to address the situation. So seven members – all of them with Greek names – are chosen from and by the wider community. They are set apart by the laying on of hands with prayer by the Twelve. Their job description is simple: They are to “wait on tables” (although the story implies that this activity includes making sure that the community's eleemosynary activity is just). They are required to be people of “good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”

It is worth noticing that the Seven are never called deacons in Acts and that they are never described carrying out the service to which they were set apart. What is described, in the cases of Stephen and Phillip at least, is a very different ministry: proclamation, evangelism and baptism, to the

point of martyrdom and across national and even biological boundaries. It may be that Luke assumed that we'd expect the Seven to carry out the duties for which they were set apart and, therefore, did not bother to describe them. It may be that the further ministries the Seven practiced would be practiced by any member of the community. But it seems more likely that setting apart for ministry – by the choice of the community and by the public prayer of its leaders – puts one in the position to be called on to function even more actively than those not so called in the central activities of the church.

From Acts 6, we might claim that **setting apart implies public leadership and will create the opportunity for model service, even beyond the specific office or function given.**

A second source, also within the New Testament, is the setting apart of deacons and bishops, most specifically in the pastoral epistles. It is worth noting that the extended descriptions of these leaders describe their characteristics and qualifications (and in very similar terms), rather than what the jobs entailed. Certainly, there is no description of the rite of setting apart, except that it included laying on of hands with prayer by a figure of authority (the presbyterate as a whole in 1 Timothy 4:14, the apostle himself in 2 Timothy 1:6). What is repeated in 1 and 2 Timothy is the notion that the ritual is one that can be remembered by the recipient for renewal, guidance or reassurance at difficult times in ministry.

Regarding the initiatory rite itself, then, we learn from the pastorals that **it has continuing meaning, certainly for the recipient, and probably for the community.**

A pair of later writings, the Apostolic Tradition (ApTrad) and the Canons of Hippolytus (CH), provide more to work with. Both of these describe not only the rites but the offices into which the participants enter. A problem is their provenance, however. ApTrad's setting is particularly controversial; it may in fact have been written by Hippolytus in Rome about 215 CE, but it seems to be mixed with material that could date from as late as the fourth century. The CH seems to be of Egyptian

origin, drawing on ApTrad and other sources. Certainly, they witness to early Christian practice, in Egypt at least.

The CH outlines both the functions and initiation of deacons. They are servants of the bishop (or the bishop and presbyters) and ministers to the sick and especially those without other support. They administer aid to the hungry and the destitute. Their central liturgical function is to present the elements to the bishop and distribute them to the people.

The ApTrad mentions (in the initiatory rite) only this liturgical task and not the other services. In its description of the rite, CH does not mention functions at all but simply calls on Stephen as a model for their ministry. While the ApTrad prays that deacons may attain “rank of a higher order,” this reference does not necessarily mean that the diaconate has already withered to a stage on the *cursus honoris*, the later required progression of deacon to presbyter to bishop; it could easily mean that, as we shall see below, bishops were often chosen from among the deacons.

In both cases, laying on of hands when one became a deacon was done by the bishop alone, not joined by the presbyters or the deacons. This practice is different from that in presbyterial ordinations, where the presbyters as a body joined the bishop in laying on hands. There are other indications that the diaconate was not seen as a college or body in the way that presbyters were.

But the diaconate are not the only offices whose initiations are described in one or both documents:

- Subdeacons are mentioned, but there is no laying on of hands or rite.
- Readers are given no rite either but simply handed the lectionary by the bishop.
- Virgins do not have an initiatory rite but self-identify.
- Widows, whose ministry involved healing as well as fasting and prayer, receive community recognition, trial, and “word” without the laying on of hands.
- Those with charisms of healing identify themselves and are recognized by the community if their ministry is efficacious.
- There is no laying on of hands for confessors, but it is not clear if this means that there was an office of confessors or if suffering imprisonment or torture for the faith made laying on of hands redundant for confessors when they became deacons, presbyters or bishops.

The legends about Lawrence would provide some further background to the ApTrad, particularly if that document could be traced to Rome earlier than the fourth century. Lawrence was a deacon at a time of persecution. Urged by his bishop to flee the city, he asked if the bishop was leaving as well. The bishop replied that he could not; bishops must not abandon their charges if under attack. Lawrence, then, went beyond what was required and stayed as well. Arrested, Lawrence was asked to turn over the treasure of the community and responded by bringing into the courtroom the poor and hungry, designating them as that treasure. (The story goes on, and gets even better, but this is the part that is germane to our consideration). We see, then, that deacons, whose initiatory service mentioned only their liturgical functions (if that), not only had responsibilities for care of the poor but were also entrusted with the community's funds. And further, that role was well enough known outside the community to make deacons a particular target of both persecution and attempted extortion.

From these sources, we might distill two different affirmations. First, **office holders not only do but are often expected to exercise public ministry wider than that mentioned in the initiatory rite.** And second, **laying on of hands is not part of the setting apart of those with only liturgical duties; those who receive this action carry on the public ministry of the church beyond its worship service.**

Fifth, among the Reformers, the case of Philipp Melanchthon is a particularly useful one. Of course, Melanchthon was not ordained, but he did undergo two important initiatory ceremonies, both of them at the borders of ecclesial, political and academic life (borders that were much more permeable in his day than ours). When he received his Master of Arts degree, it carried with it the authority to teach his subject. And when he was entrusted with the office of a university professor, he was placed under the obligation to teach. Both of these occasions included initiatory rites. And it seemed that the authority and responsibility were not limited to classroom. Melanchthon, as master (doctorate carried no further authorization) and as professor became the preceptor of Germany, the author of the Augsburg Confession and (especially after Martin Luther's death) the arbiter of theological disputes.

Further, his position seemed to make him what he called in the Confession “rightly called” to preach, since he did so, at least to international students and at funerals.

From Melancthon’s academic experience, therefore, we might assert that **setting apart may be stretched to provide unusual, unexpected but needed service.**

Finally, and very close to home for me, Samuel Simon Schmucker’s experience as a seminary professor might be a useful example. Schmucker, of course, was a pastor and received presbyteral ordination. But he also wrote his own pledge as the first theological professor at the foundation of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. The Ministerium of Pennsylvania and its daughter synods did not, in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, include confessional subscription in the ordination promises (Henry Muhlenberg and his colleagues did, but it was removed in the 1790s). Schmucker included a promise to teach in accord with the Augsburg Confession in his inaugural ceremony and made such a promise a requirement of all professors in the constitution of the new seminary.

Thus, **setting apart to a special task or function within an already existing group may recognize the greater expertise or stricter promises required.**

Putting these themes together, there are some affirmations I would make for the work of the group:

- The ministry of word and service is not primarily a liturgical one. Setting deacons apart, therefore, with the laying on of hands and prayer by a bishop would be entirely appropriate.
- The liturgical leadership of deacons is, however, a fine signal of their wider ministry, and including that setting apart in a service of Holy Communion (and including the deacon in such leadership as the presentation and distribution of the elements) is, therefore, also entirely appropriate.
- The initiation ritual for deacons should reflect the distinctive character, purpose and integrity of that roster and not simply imitate the ordination of presbyters.
- That initiation ritual need not include specific reference to the deacon’s specialization, nor to the community of deacons (although, of course, it should set the diaconate in the context of the wider ministry of all the baptized and the complementary ministry of presbyters and bishops).

- Later rites should indicate more specific aspects of the deacon's service. For instance, entry into the deaconess community would lay significant stress on the community itself; installation services would include promises and charges peculiar to the call that the deacon is beginning.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. The documents of the early church suggest that deacons set apart with laying on of hands and prayer had both a liturgical function and ministries beyond the church gathered for worship. How might ordaining ministers of word and service in the ELCA assist in linking the liturgical functions and the "beyond" functions of deacons today? Do you see any negative effects of ordaining ministers of word and service in helping to make the connection between liturgical and other functions?
2. Oldenburg suggests that "The initiation ritual for deacons should reflect the distinctive character, purpose, and integrity of that roster and not simply imitate the ordination of presbyters." As you understand the ministry of word and service, what does this suggest about aspects that should be included in the entrance rite going forward?
3. Oldenburg states that the setting apart of people, for example the setting apart of the Seven in Acts 6, seems to be in response to specific needs within the faith community. Are there needs in your congregation/context that might be met by "set-apart" ministers of word and service? What roles might be appropriate in addition to meeting those specific needs?