

**A liturgical perspective on the question of the ordination of deacons in the ELCA:
Some theses and questions
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The following theses emerge from a consideration of the copper relief doors crafted by Eva Dittrich Leo for Wartburg Seminary in 1977 (see the image of Leo's doors). The doors depict Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus' prophetic and parabolic description of the final judgment of all nations, all people. The inscription interprets the images of a hungry one given food, a thirsty one given drink, the stranger welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for, and the one in prison visited: "As you have done it to one of the least of my own, you have done it to me" (verse 40). When you look again at the images, you see that the bread offered is eucharistic bread, and the drink offered comes in a eucharistic cup. With that, it is not hard to see in the other images references to things we do at worship: strangers are welcomed; a person is clothed in the baptismal garment; the poor, the sick, the imprisoned are acknowledged, prayed for, cared for.



The images in these doors show the deep connection for the followers of Jesus between in their assembly for worship (*leitourgia*) and their lives of service to others (*diakonia*). The connection is this: Both constitute the followers of Jesus in their witness (*martyria*) to Jesus Christ, who is present in bread and cup, in baptismal washing and praying assembly, and also in the neighbor, especially the last, the lost, the least. The gracious, loving and life-giving purpose of God in Christ is thus enacted by the followers of Jesus in witness, worship and service. Together *martyria-leitourgia-diakonia* constitute the church in a single sacramental reality: Jesus Christ himself.

Thesis I

In Christ, the church is called to witness to the good news of the reign of God (martyria), to worship in word and sacrament (leitourgia), and to serve the neighbor (diakonia). These are not separate things but part of a single sacramental reality: the presence and purpose of God in Jesus Christ.

Thesis II

The public office of ministry, the ministry of the Word (ministerium Verbi), to which individuals are called and ordained, serves the whole people of God in these fundamental callings of witness, worship and service.

Thesis III

Potentially there are different ministries within the ministry of the Word, such as what the ELCA terms "pastor" ("ministry of word and sacrament") and "deacon" ("ministry of word and service") with differentiated responsibilities. Diaconal ministry is rightly understood as a dimension of the public office of ministry, and ordination to the diaconate is appropriate.

Thesis IV

Because of the integral relationship among martyria-leitourgia-diakonia, all ministries within the public office of ministry show the connection of these various dimensions of ministry. The pastor's role with its particular responsibility for word and sacrament in the church's leitourgia also and necessarily connects to the church's diakonia, just as the deacon's role with its particular responsibility for the church's diakonia also and necessarily connects to the church's leitourgia. Both ministries involve various forms of martyria, including verbal witness to the Word and its proclamation.

Within the public office of ministry, diaconal ministry does not focus exclusively on the dimension of service but shows the connection to the assembly for worship. The deacon ordained to the public office of ministry has responsibilities in and for the liturgical assembly and participates in various forms of witness and proclamation.

Thesis V

The historic role of the deacon at the liturgy includes prompting the prayer and intercession of the praying assembly, proclaiming the Gospel reading, serving at the eucharistic table (preparing the table, receiving and setting out the gifts, and assisting with the distribution of communion), and sending the assembly into its mission and ministry in and for the world. All of these liturgical ministries mirror the deacon's service to the church's diakonia, the ministry of all the baptized to serve the neighbor, especially the vulnerable, the marginalized and those most in need. That the deacon is given to sing the Exultet, the great proclamation of praise for risen Lord at the Easter Vigil, reflects the doxological ground of all diaconal ministry. The liturgical ministries of the deacon show the regular gathering around the means of grace to be the source of the church's life and mission. It also gives visibility in the assembly to the world's needs and concerns, which in fact are always carried into the assembly by those who gather.

While these ministries have been distinctive to the deacon's liturgical role, they need not belong to the deacon as an exclusive "right" or "privilege." The positive experience of a growing number of congregations with "lay" assisting ministers could in fact be furthered by the deacon's support and encouragement to many others in the exercise of these responsibilities.

Thesis VI

Theological education and diaconal formation needs to take place in relation the particular area(s) of service, to liturgical understanding and practice, and to the verbal communication of the gospel.

Thesis VII

Such an understanding of diaconal ministry preserves two distinctive Lutheran understandings: 1) the ministry of all the baptized and 2) the unitary character of the public office of ministry.

In baptism, every Christian is called to follow Jesus and to exercise the ministry of witness, worship and service in Jesus' name. This ministry is lived out in daily life and the multiple vocations given to each by God.

The church's ministry of witness to the Word, worship in word and sacrament and service to the neighbor reflects a single sacramental reality: the presence and purpose of God in Jesus Christ. The public office of ministry—however it is structured—serves the church's ministry of martyrion-leitourgia-diakonia as these are one thing in the one Lord Jesus Christ (see again the Leo doors).

General questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do you see *martyria* (witness to the gospel), *leitourgia* (worship in the word and sacrament) and *diakonia* (service to the neighbor) related and interconnected in the life of your congregation?
2. How might a deacon support, energize and lead the *diakonia* of your congregation?

Questions for reflection and discussion for church leaders

1. How could ministers of word and service and ministers of word and sacrament be formed in the fullness of ministry as *martyria-leitourgia-diakonia*?
2. What does it mean to be public ministers of word? How does this link deacons (ministers of word and service) and pastors (ministers of word and sacrament)?