

Here a Deacon, There a Deacon, Everywhere a Deacon, Deacon

A Brief Sampling of Current Uses of the Role/Title “Deacon” in the ELCA and Beyond

By Bishop Bill Gafkjen on behalf of the Transition & Communication Sub-Group + July 2014

This document was prepared for internal use in support of the work of the ELCA Word and Service Ministry Task Force. Three intentions shape its content: (1) to briefly explore current uses of the term "deacon" in ELCA contexts, (2) to similarly explore current uses of the term in ecumenical, especially full communion partner, contexts, and (3) to provide a descriptive paragraph that highlights the distinctive characteristics of rostered deacons of the ELCA in reference to those uses and contexts.

A cursory exploration of synodical documents and congregational websites accompanied by conversation with a variety of folks across the church suggests that the word, title and role of deacon is alive and well in the life of the church, albeit in a wide variety of expressions and tasks. The forms and levels of training and formation, as well as public or ecclesial recognition of this ministry, also vary greatly, from local/congregational to synodical, from informal recognition to a freestanding graduation ceremony, from volunteer service to churchwide rostering. The rites of initiation also vary. What follows is a small, simple sampling, not an exhaustive list, either in breadth or depth.

ELCA local, synod and churchwide

ELCA deaconess. As a consecrated roster of the ELCA, “the Deaconess Community consists of theologically trained, professionally prepared women, called to ministry and service by congregations and synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.” Theological training of ELCA deaconesses typically includes a Masters of Arts in Religion or similar degree. Deaconesses are engaged in intentional community with one another, are professionally trained for particular vocations, and serve under call from a congregation, synod council, ELCA Church Council, or other agent of the denomination with a focus on service ministry.

ELCA diaconal minister. As a consecrated roster of the ELCA, diaconal ministers offer a ministry of Word and service, sharing the hope of Christ, helping where there is need, and equipping others for healing and justice in the world. Diaconal ministers hold a theological masters degree and training or degree work in a professionally focused area. Diaconal ministers serve under call through agencies, institutions, synod councils, and traditional church programs as they build bridges between the church and the world.

Synodical or parish deacon. A number of ELCA synods have established some form of synodical deacon (e.g. Metro New York, Upper New York, Florida Bahamas, Metro Chicago). In most cases, synodical deacons are trained through a two-year program of study and formation (usually using an extra-synodical program like Diakonia; see description below). After completion of the course, participants are considered for certification by synod leadership and serve in congregations, most often their home congregation, engaging particular tasks under supervision and in partnership with the congregation’s pastor. In most cases, the deacon’s term of service is coterminous with that of the congregation’s pastor. In some synods such deacons may serve on behalf of synod leadership at the conference or synodical level, primarily engaged in administration and non-sacramental ministry (e.g. preaching, liturgical leadership) for and with congregations. Most such deacons serve either as volunteers or under contract with a small stipend.

Congregational deacon. Some ELCA congregations use the term “deacon” to indicate all elected members of the congregation’s leadership council. In other congregations deacons are specific congregation council members who are tasked primarily with some aspect of the administration of the congregation or worship leadership. Some congregations use the term deacon for those lay people (whether elected or not) who assist in leading worship at or around the Table in some way (e.g. assisting ministers, communion servers, etc.). While some of these folks might receive training in partnership with other congregations, most are elected or appointed, trained and installed by and for the local congregation.

Independent Lutheran organizations

Lutheran Deaconess Association Deaconess/Deacon (LDA). A pan-Lutheran organization located in Valparaiso, Ind., the LDA says that it “prepares women and men for ministries of service to those in need in the church and world, supports deaconesses and deacons in their various ministries, affirms the whole people of God in their own diaconal service, and assists the church in its diaconal mission.” Upon completion of a non-degree program of coursework, community life, internship and formation, LDA deaconesses and deacons (a recent addition) are consecrated by the LDA community for their ministry in the world, which may occur through formalized call, employment, volunteer ministry, or in daily life. Those who are members of the ELCA and desire to be rostered typically also move through candidacy for commissioning as an associate in ministry or consecration as a diaconal minister.

Diakonia program. Operating in one form or another and through various relationships with a number of synods and their leadership, the independent Diakonia program describes itself as “a two-year process of spiritual formation and theological education for baptized members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or anyone wishing in good faith to study these teachings ... to provide each participant the opportunity to discover their God-given gifts, strengthen their faith and their abilities, and give them purpose within their own congregations, synods, and the church-wide body of Christ.” Some synods use this program as the primary locus of education and formation for synodical deacons. Others in which the program operates do not have a formal relationship with it and most graduates (who sometimes call themselves deacon or deaconess) do not move through a process of synodical or other recognition for more public ministry. Rather, in these situations they either serve on a volunteer basis in their home congregations or simply continue to grow in their own daily discipleship.

Whatever the particular role or context, on the whole those who bear the title or role of deacon in the ELCA carry responsibility for some form of service ministry. Some also proclaim the Word through preaching and teaching in local settings. Very few deacons or deaconesses preside at Holy Communion or Holy Baptism, and then only under episcopal authorization. Many also carry the stated responsibility 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.

Deacon of the ELCA. This last responsibility of deacons, to empower and equip others, is a keystone for the emerging ministry of deacons of the ELCA. 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 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.

Consequently, the “new” unified Roster of Deacons of the ELCA consists of those who have been identified, formed, trained, called and consecrated or ordained for ministries of Word and Service throughout the whole church through locally stewarded churchwide processes. Deacons of the ELCA are supported by and accountable to churchwide standards and commitments as well as the synodical and local accountabilities and support of the ministries they serve. Deacons of the ELCA have responsibility and opportunity for engagement in broader ecumenical ministerial and ecclesial relationships. Unlike all other “non-rostered” deacons in ELCA settings, the ministry and rostering of deacons of the ELCA may be recognized and transferred across synods and institutions.

Deacons in a troika of ecumenical full communion contexts

The Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church has two formally defined orders of deacon: Transitional deacons and those whose lifelong call is to serve as deacon. The former, transitional deacons, are those who are preparing for ordination to “the presbyterate,” or priesthood. The latter are more relevant to this discussion.

It is difficult to find a clear, universally applicable description of the role of ordained deacons in The Episcopal Church. This is due, in part, to the responsibility of each diocese to shape this role (and preparation for it) according to its needs. Nevertheless, there are some common foundations.

For example, the Canon to the Ordinary¹ of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis characterizes the role of deacons this way: “The mission of the deacon is to be a holy person who walks out of the church to deeply encounter the world at large, and then walks back in to explain to those inside what was discovered. The lay people and priests are seen more as the evangelists to the world, while the deacon is the conscience of the church, reminding us of our role as servants to those outside the doors.”

Each diocese determines its own requirements for the formation and education of deacons. The most common current practice today is for deacons to be trained within the diocese over a multi-year period using volunteer instructors (both ordained and lay people), meeting on weekends and evenings.

Although deacons are not compensated for their ministry, they are considered clergy, voting in conventions as clergy, filling clergy positions on boards and commissions that have defined clergy and lay seats, being accountable to all clergy disciplinary canons. They are expected to dress when on duty in a clerical collar and to vest as a deacon at worship. Only priests and bishops can offer sacramental blessings and consecrate the elements of the Eucharist, but deacons are supposed to have the first priority over other clergy in reading the Gospel at a Eucharist, and also offer the dismissal at the end. By rubrics, deacons are supposed to offer the Prayers of the People, but in practice many congregations prefer that a layperson offer the prayers. Otherwise, deacons are not supposed to take strong leadership roles in congregations except in social justice/outreach ministries.

The Episcopal canons dictate that once a deacon has been ordained “the Bishop, after consultation with the Deacon and the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight, may assign a Deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith or non-parochial ministries. Deacons assigned to a congregation or other community of faith act under the authority of the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight in all matters concerning the congregation.”

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Following the development of Reformed ecclesiology, the Presbyterian Church (USA) ordains people to three ordered ministries: ministers, elders and deacons. These three ministries represent two ecclesial functions: ministries of the Word performed by presbyters (pastors and elders) and ministries of service performed by deacons. Deacons are elected and ordained by and serve in a local congregation

for particular, renewable terms as part of a board of deacons or as individual deacons elected to particular positions of responsibility. They lead the local church in its ministries of compassion (distributing aid, caring directly for the poor, the sick, refugees, and prisoners), and justice (working for equity in society). Deacons often also assume other duties as assigned by the congregation's session (council), including worship responsibilities like assisting with Holy Communion. Many deacons are also tasked with care of congregational members and their particular needs or work with new-member welcome and incorporation.

According to the denomination's "Book of Order," once deacons are ordained, they remain ordained even if not currently serving on the congregation's session or board of deacons. In fact, they remain so as long as they are active members of any congregation of the denomination, unless and until the ordination is revoked through disciplinary or other formal measures.

The United Methodist Church

The United Methodist "Book of Discipline" (paragraph 303.2) says, "Men and women who respond to God's call to lead in service and to equip others for this ministry through teaching proclamation, and worship and who assist elders² in the administration of the sacraments are ordained deacon." Deacons are said to be called by God, authorized by the church, and ordained by a bishop to a lifelong public ministry of Word and Service. This is expressed in teaching and proclaiming the Word and assisting elders in administration of (but not presiding at) Baptism and Eucharist in worship, forming and nurturing disciples, conducting marriages and funerals, and both serving in the world and creating opportunities for other disciples to become aware of and to address the needs and hopes of the world.

United Methodist deacons may work primarily in congregations or they may work primarily in settings like hospitals, social service agencies, etc. When a deacon serves in a setting beyond the local congregation, such a deacon is to be given a "secondary" appointment by her or his bishop to a congregation where they "take missional responsibility for leading other Christians into ministries of service." In rare and carefully defined situations, a deacon may or may not be authorized by the bishop to preside at Holy Communion in the absence of an elder.

United Methodist deacons are categorized as clergy. In addition to engaging a candidacy process, all deacons, like all elders, are required to complete a minimum of 24 semester hours of theological education at an approved seminary. This may or may not be part of a degree program.

The United Methodist Church once consecrated diaconal ministers but no longer consecrates new ones. Diaconal ministers were understood to be laypeople who lead in service ministries. This lay ministry now falls under the church's office of home missionaries and deaconesses.

Finally, a brief word about the word 'deacon' and gender

It is interesting to note that in nearly all of the above usages of the term "deacon," the word is used in a non-gender specific manner. In other words, "deacon" refers to both men and women who serve in that office. The most common exceptions appear to be where there are established communities that consist primarily or exclusively of women. In those cases, the term "deaconess" is used for women and, as in the case of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, "deacon" is employed for men as they have recently been added to the community. This appears to be the case, on the whole, across traditions, with some exceptions, of course.

The non-gender specific use of the term deacon appears to be the most common norm over time and geography. This practice appears to follow that of the apostle Paul, who, for example, does not use a feminine form in referring to "our sister Phoebe, a deacon [diakonon] of the church" in Romans 16:1. It is also of interest to note that in many aspects of contemporary North American life, the use of

feminine forms (which are sometimes referred to in linguistic literature as “diminutives”) of many titles or roles has begun to disappear or to even be regarded as inappropriate. For example, those who travel by air are no longer tended to by “stewards” and “stewardesses,” but by “flight attendants.” Note also the increasingly frequent transition in public discourse from the use of “actor/actress” to “actor” and from “waiter/waitress” to “server.”

Consequently, as it carries this consistent, persistent biblical, historical, ecclesial connection with the sort of servant (diakonia) ministry engaged by those who hold this office, the term “deacon” appears most appropriate for contemporary usage with a new unified roster of Word and Service in the ELCA, which will include women and men alike. Use of the term and title “deaconess” will likely continue for those who have used it in the past and may also be used by some women who enter this roster in the future. This need not be cause for conflict or correction, but, rather, may be honored as yet another expression of the rich diversity of life and ministry in the Spirit and opportunity for conversation and clarity about this important role in the life of the church.

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A smattering of documents and sources consulted:

Colleagues in judicatory offices of full-communion denominations

Constitution and Canons, Episcopal Church –

<http://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/648>

diakonia – <http://www.thediakoniaprogram.org>

ELCA Candidacy Manual and other documents –

<http://www.elca.org/en/Our-Work/Leadership/Vocation-Become-a-Leader/Lay-Rosters>

Episcopal Diocese of Kansas –

http://www.episcopal-ks.org/resources/documents/Deacon_guidelines_2008.pdf

Lutheran Deaconess Association members and website – <http://www.thelda.org>

Upstate New York Synod, ELCA –

<http://upstatenysynod.org/download/deacons/Brief%20Guide%20for%20Pastors%202-13.pdf>

Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA) –

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/ministers/ordination/>

“The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide” by Earl S. Johnson, Jr.

United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry –

<http://www.gbhem.org/clergy/deacons>

¹ Similar to a synodical assistant to the bishop in the ELCA.

² United Methodist elders correlate, essentially, to ELCA pastors.