

Diaconal ministry: The entrance rite question
Reflections from a consideration of symbolic meaning and ritual practice
By Gordon W. Lathrop

I would say that three important issues arise when we consider a Lutheran approach to symbol and ritual side-by-side with the newly unified ELCA Roster of Ministers of Word and Service—now called “deacons”—and the question of the entrance rite that might be used as individuals are welcomed to that roster. It seems to me that the most profound issue is this: How does diaconal ministry relate to our assemblies of the baptized gathered in worship? How are our ministers of word and service themselves communal symbols and bearers of our communal meanings? What does it mean that we have chosen to use the word “deacon” to mark this ministry? The second issue only then follows: What actually are the rites of *ordination*, *consecration*, and *commissioning*? How have these rites functioned in those same assemblies? And which of these rites may be appropriate for our understanding of the ministry of deacons? A third important issue should also be addressed: What liturgical/symbolic misunderstandings may be possible in the use of any of these rites, and how can those misunderstandings be avoided? So: *deacons and the assembly*, *rites at the inauguration of a ministry*, and *avoiding misunderstandings*. This brief paper will seek to address these three issues.

1. Deacons and the assembly

As the Evangelical Lutheran Worship companion volume Occasional Services for the Assembly (p. 200) says, “Although this [diaconal] ministry has taken different forms throughout the church’s history, its emphasis has been this: Those called to the diaconate speak God’s word to God’s world, and in turn they speak also for the needs of God’s world to the church; they give leadership in the church’s mission to witness to God’s love through both words and actions.” In the first centuries of the church, centuries in which the church came into existence as a meal-fellowship, *diakonoi*/deacons were, quite simply, *table servers*, distributors of the church’s food: They helped with eating and drinking in the church; they carried communion to the sick and the absent; they especially assisted and gave leadership to the distribution of the church’s help to the wretched and the poor. In company with and in direct responsibility to the bishop—at least in many local congregations—they distributed to those in need what had been collected in the assembly. Lawrence of Rome, for whom many medieval churches were named—many of them now Lutheran—is a classic example of this historic role in the third century. Because of their knowledge of those in need, these deacons also came to be entrusted with the task of leading intercessions in the assembly. And because they were to lead the assembly in embodying care for the neighbor—in thus proclaiming God’s word in the world by actions—they also were sometimes entrusted with reading the Gospel and even preaching in the church. They also assisted the bishop in baptizing and sometimes also taught those who were coming to baptism—those who were thus joining the meal-community of witness and service. Already in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch regarded them as “entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ” (IgnMagn 6:1). For him, if the bishop was a symbol of God and the council of presbyters symbols of the apostles, then the deacons, because of their service, were to be seen as types or symbols of Jesus Christ (cf. IgnTrall 2:3 and 3:1).

Their role thus is not presiding and not giving counsel or deciding; it is serving.

That is a role that belongs to every Christian, of course, as part of our baptismal vocation, part of our being formed as the body of Christ. But in the current ecumenical recovery of the ministry of deacons—as a distinctive office and not as a transition to something else—that very *doing-what-belongs-to-us-all* has been regarded as a strength, not a loss. The deacon has a representative ministry, representing Christ’s own diaconal ministry, symbolizing our common calling in Christ and opening doors of opportunity for service for us all. We can use more figures like Lawrence, helping us turn our liturgical practice toward our needy neighbor.

Indeed, this role of the deacon was sometimes recovered in early Lutheran churches: The 1529 Church Order for Hamburg written by Johannes Bugenhagen, for example, uses the name “deacon”/*Diaken* for those who have charge of the common chest, to which the assembly contributed and from which support was given to the poor.

Thus, the important Lima Document—*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*—already said in 1982, “by struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of the congregation: for example by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. ... They exercise a ministry of love within the community” (Ministry 31). Thus, the Swedish theologian Sven-Erik Brodd argues that deacons are not simply charity workers or administrators in various social institutions; they stand between the eucharistic table and the hungry world as signs of the *koinonia* and *diakonia* that are in Christ; their work in the world flows from the assembly (*The Distinctive Diaconate*, Diocese of Salisbury 2003, 38-39). And thus, the Diocese of Salisbury in the Church of England states, “The deacon in the church has a non-presidential, representative ministry, representing Christ’s own diaconal ministry” (*The Distinctive Diaconate*, 87). That diaconal ministry of Christ occurs as the risen Lord serves his people in the assembly, going out to them in love; it also occurs as the body of Christ reaches out in the world, following where the head has already gone.

Some of the ELCA’s ministers of word and service understand their vocation in just this classic way of the “deacon.” They may be engaged in ministries of music, education, administration or service in a congregation or synod, or they may be employed in ministries of social service in the world. But they wish to see these ministries as firmly anchored in the Christian assembly around Christ in word and sacrament. They find themselves working closely with pastors and the synod bishop. On Sunday, they may be among the communion ministers, including among those who carry communion to the sick. They may lead the intercessions, and in partnership with the local pastor, they may read the Gospel and preach. They find in their assembly tasks the source and center of the diaconal work they also do during the week. They have been trained for these tasks. And, especially in intercessions and preaching, they bring news of the needy world to the attention of the church. They are appointed for the assembly and for the world, for the world and for the assembly.

The Diocese of Salisbury points out that the classic liturgical roles of the deacon are these: Bring the book of the Gospels into the assembly and read from it; lead the intercessions; set the table for the eucharist with gifts brought by the people, setting aside for distribution the

gifts brought for the poor; minister the chalice; dismiss the assembly to service. Some of our deacons carry out these roles.

But others of the ELCA's ministers of word and service see their relationship to the Sunday assembly in another way. If they have the gifts to do so, they may sometimes take their place among the assisting ministers in a congregation's liturgy. Whether they do so, like all the baptized they are refreshed in word and sacrament to turn in the name of Christ to the needs of the world. For some, the grace of God given to them in the assembly may, week after week, enable them to be part of an explicitly committed community of caregivers or community of people who pray—*deaconesses*. But they do not see themselves as having a regular *ministerial* role in the Sunday assembly or as being called to speak in prayer and preaching that has an essential connection to their daily work. Their work may relate to the Sunday assembly in just the same profound way as does the daily-life ministry of all the baptized.

These could be divergent ways of understanding diaconal work. Furthermore, this divergence may be compounded by the fact that some ministers of word and service may be employed full-time by congregations, some may be employed by social service or other organizations, and some may not be employed at all in their exercise of their ministry.

But it strikes me that if we are to use the word “deacon” as the shared title for all these “rostered” individuals, it is profoundly important that we keep recovering the assembly connection and the symbolic meaning of this ecumenically used, Christian term. It is not that everyone need have the same understanding of the relationship of their ministry to the Sunday assembly, but that such relationship, in one way or another, is essential. Our deacons must not be lone rangers of charity. They need to be symbols for us all of the ways word and sacrament “lead Christians to lived prayer” and “strengthen us to witness and to work for justice” (*Use of the Means of Grace* 53 and 54), symbols of how the Holy Communion makes us “feel with sorrow ... all the unjust suffering of the innocent with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing” (Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament,” 9), symbols of the way the liturgy ends, “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.” and “Go in peace. Remember the poor.” Deacons should especially remind us of the poor. They need to be communally connected as types of baptismal vocation, as signs of the diakonia of Jesus Christ.

For us to recover this idea of the relationship of deacon and assembly will take intentional and regular teaching in the ELCA. And among other goals of training, the deacons among us must be trained in such of the roles of the assisting minister as any particular deacon has the gifts to exercise.

2. Rites at the inauguration of a ministry

How we understand what relationship “deacons” or “ministers of word and service” have to the assembly around word and sacrament has everything to do with the rite we may use to mark the inauguration of their ministry.

Since ancient times, the appointment to an office by the laying on of hands—sometimes called “ordination,” sometimes called by other names—has been for the sake of the assembly.

Most Christians have generally followed the counsel we find preserved, probably from the fourth century, in *The Apostolic Tradition* (c. 10): “*Cheirotonia* (“stretching out the hands” or “voting with the hands;” thus election, appointment or ordination) is for the clergy, on account of their liturgical duties.” Among Lutherans, pastors (or *presbyters* or, in Nordic countries, “priests”) have been ordained for congregational service—thus, for assembly purpose, for preaching and presiding at the sacraments. Recently, influenced by ecumenical dialogue about the “three-fold ministry”—especially as that dialogue has existed between Anglican and Lutheran churches in northern Europe—some Lutheran churches in the world have begun also to ordain bishops and deacons—similarly for very specific assembly purpose: for presiding in the assembled area church (synod or diocese), in the case of bishops, and for embodying the outreach of the assembly to the poor, in the case of deacons.

On the other hand, since at least the 19th century Lutherans have “consecrated”—or set apart for holy purpose—the deacons and especially the deaconesses who formed communities of nursing, teaching, social work and prayer. The language used here built on the ancient Christian practice of “consecrating” virgins and widows for lives of prayer and service, though not for specific roles in assembly worship. In recent years, the ELCA has consecrated people who are designated as diaconal ministers.

Associates in ministry (AIMs) have been commissioned, as have missionaries, both lay and ordained, though the service of commissioning in that case is different than in the case of AIMs. And congregational leaders and teachers and lay professional staff have been installed. So have previously ordained pastors, consecrated diaconal ministers and commissioned AIMs when they have taken up specific ministries. Furthermore, in the ELCA “installation” is what we call the making of a bishop.

For recent versions of these rites, see *Occasional Services for the Assembly*, pp. 187-268.

Several things should be noted about these rites, however. The central action in all the ones we are considering—in the ordination of a pastor, the consecration of diaconal minister, the commissioning of an AIM, and the installation of a bishop—is the same: the laying on of hands accompanied by a prayer of thanksgiving and invocation of the Spirit. This is an action that comes first from baptism: a prayer that the Spirit may stir up and use the baptismal gifts. And then that prayer is like all the prayers of blessing in Christian use; following the model of the great thanksgiving at the table, prayers of thanksgiving and beseeching are used over the water of the font, over the candle of the Easter Vigil and of Evening Prayer, over spouses in a marriage, over many things used in the assembly, and over the assembly’s ministries. The laying on of hands both points to the one for whom we are praying and gives us a symbol of bestowal. We say, “This one is given authority to do this ministry, thanks be to God.” We also say, “Help this one do this ministry so that the gospel is served; come Holy Spirit!” Both. (Note: Ministers are prayed over and blessed exactly as the bread and wine of Holy Communion are prayed over and blessed. In the case of the bread and wine, we have the promise of Christ, so we call this use a “sacrament.” In the case of ministers, the promise is associated with speaking and signing the gospel, so Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson (in *Lutheranism*) may be right that for us the ministers are like bread: On, in and under their ministry we encounter and receive Christ. Ministers are not

so much *recipients* themselves of a sacramental reality as a *means* of the assembly and the world where the assembly is located for receiving the gospel.)

Furthermore, in all of these rites yet more of the classic “process of admission to ministry,” as James Puglisi calls it (*The Process of Admission to Ordained Ministry*, vols. 1-4, Liturgical Press: 1996), is represented. A bishop presides, signifying connection to the whole church. Testimony is given to the fact that the candidate has been prepared, examined and called to a specific ministry: we do no absolute ordination or consecration or commissioning, without what used to be called a “title” or without a communal task, a call. And the assent—event the election—of the community is indicated one or another way. Puglisi says that ordination is always personal, collegial and communal: a called person; a college of other ministers; a community as the location of ministry. And he says that ordination always involves election, laying on of hands with prayer, and the taking up of the ministry. That latter process thus extends beyond the service of ordination or consecration itself but is sometimes symbolized in the service by *investiture* or *traditio instrumentorum*, by putting on a stole or a cross or by handing over a Bible, a chasuble, or a basin and towel. (It should be noted that the people of the later Middle Ages came to regard putting on clothing or handing over of vessels as the *real* moment of ordination. I would argue that such practice can easily lead to missing the communal orientation of all ministry and that we should under-emphasize these secondary symbols and continue to make the laying on of hands in the middle of a praying community the principal sign in our midst. If basin and towel are used for deacons, I hope it will be in the context of our church continuing to recover foot washing as a major practice on Maundy Thursday, a practice wherein everyone—not just clergy—both is washed and washes, according to our baptismal vocation. Or should we rather, as indication of assembly service, be giving deacons a stole to be worn diagonally?)

So, ordination, consecration and commissioning have all involved election, laying on of hands with prayer, and the taking up of a ministry. But then if all of these services are essentially the same, what is the question? The issue is what we call the rite, and therein lies the possibility of misunderstanding.

3. Avoiding misunderstandings

First, were we to use the word “ordination” for the entrance rite of ministers of word and service, we would need to attend to the widespread North American Lutheran understanding of that term. Most of our people know of only one ordination: the appointment and praying for *pastors*. The ELCA has been up to now committed to this single understanding of ordained ministry, rooting that commitment in the classic Lutheran confessional understanding of one office, “the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments” (AC Latin Article 5), instituted by God. Because of that conception of a single office, the appointment of bishops among us has been limited to people who are already pastors and has been called “installation,” even though other Christians might call what we do ritually “the ordination of a bishop.” Given that background, if a deacon is “ordained,” many people may well consider that he or she is available for call to be a local parish pastor or is authorized to preside at the Holy Communion or to preach without supervision. Yet, also among us, the definition of the Anglicans in Salisbury obtains: “The deacon in the church has a non-presidential, representative ministry, representing

Christ's own diaconal ministry." Perhaps this misunderstanding will be alleviated by more extensive education. Or perhaps we really do wish to begin to think as a church about how the one office has diverse forms or even to think about its three-fold character. I, for one, think that "ordaining" deacons may well imply that we should also be "ordaining" bishops. Such a decision will require an intentional ELCA churchwide discussion and resolution, as well as several years of education. We might then consider that if Augsburg Confession Article 14 implies, as Melancthon says in the Apology, that we gladly accept classic canonical ordination as practiced in the Catholic churches, then a current reading of that acceptance would include the three-fold ministry. The main Lutheran point, emphasized in Articles 4, 5, and 7, would be to insist that any ministry must serve the gospel of Jesus Christ, alive in an assembly that is brought to faith by the means of grace and through faith made to bear witness to the world.

Or perhaps a better plan would be to continue to use the word "consecration" for all deacons and "installation" for bishops. There really is a strength in the Lutheran commitment to a single office of word and sacrament ministry. And there is also a strength in seeing that an assembly-based word and service ministry is a real ministry, though it is different from that of a pastor. That difference could be supported by the strong history of the word "consecration," freshly interpreted as appointment by election, prayer with the laying on of hands, and the taking up of a ministry that symbolizes for all of us the service of Jesus Christ.

4. Which shall we choose?

Second, if the task of the deacon or diaconal minister is to include assembly leadership in prayer or serving communion—as I argue is one way concretely to see the assembly basis of the deacon's work—then it is especially important that this ministry not replace or marginalize the congregational ministry of trained lay assisting ministers. The recovery of many lay assisting ministries in the Sunday assembly has been one of the most important achievements of North American Lutheran liturgical renewal in the 20th and 21st centuries. In every church that has engaged in the recovery of the diaconate in our time that recovery has gone paired with some urgent consideration of what is thereby implied for a great variety of lay ministries. Does diaconate push them aside? The consideration of the assisting minister is one form of this question among us. I am hoping that the general idea that the deacon symbolizes the service of Jesus Christ to which we are all called in baptism may be of some help here. The deacon in our midst could be a model for assisting ministries, not their replacement. And some deacons might also take on the task of teaching and training lay assisting ministers.

In any case, whatever decision is taken about the entrance rite needs to attend to the fact that our Roster of Ministers of Word and Service already includes many people with quite divergent ways of understanding their relationship to the liturgical assembly. Accommodating that diversity and praying for those diverse ministries with a single rite will be a complex task. I hope that these reflections may be of some assistance in sorting through that complexity.

General questions for reflection and discussion

1. Prayer and the laying on of hands are used in confirmation, baptism, healing, installation, consecration, ordination and many other contexts. How do you understand the similarities and differences?
2. In the history of the ELCA, the ordination of pastors, consecration of diaconal ministers and deaconesses, and the commissioning of associates in ministry “have all involved election, laying on of hands with prayer, and the taking up of the ministry.” Given the similarity of rites, do these terms matter for the church’s ministry? If so, how?
3. Lathrop is concerned about “misunderstandings.” What misunderstandings are possible with a decision to either consecrate or ordain deacons? Are these potential misunderstandings important? If important, how might they be addressed?

Questions for reflection and discussion for church leaders

1. How does Lathrop’s understanding of rites for entry to public ministry relate to your experience and understanding of the church’s mission?
2. How does Lathrop’s understanding of the deacon in worship relate to your experience as a pastor, deacon or other congregational leader? What roles might a deacon play in the worship life of your congregation?