

A brief and recent history of the diaconate in Minnesota –
or how we got to where we are
from Irma Wyman

In the Episcopal Church, General Convention in 1952 restored the diaconate for men, commonly called “perpetual deacons”. Their ministry was to be “as assistant in any parish or parishes to which he may be assigned.” Beginning in 1964 a deacon was allowed to be in charge of a congregation. Most were older men, raised out of the congregations in which they were to function, often personally picked by the parish priest, and locally trained. Although changes in the Canons in 1970 altered the nature of the order, from pastoral and sacramental assistant to leader of works of mercy and social justice, these “parish deacons”, sacramental and pastoral assistants, continued to be ordained until 1980. Rectors came and went but the deacon remained. In the words of a perpetual deacon, “A priest can be replaced; a deacon, in evidence at the same altar for twenty, thirty, forty years assisting so many people, cannot.”

Therefore, the first image of the non-transitional deacon that priests and people in Minnesota congregations saw was a person who came out of their congregation, provided a communion service when a priest was not available, and was a pastor. First impressions are hard to replace, and I often hear from people in congregations today that what they are hoping for in a deacon is consistent with the ministry of the “perpetual deacon”, authorized at that time in diocesan history. .

After the Canon changes of 1970, many perpetual deacons felt disenfranchised. Rectors had given at least part of the deacon’s ministry to lay persons – chalice bearers and prayers of the people. Even more painful was the limiting of the deacon’s presiding. In most places, especially in isolated rural congregations, perpetual deacons had officiated at the “deacon’s mass” – a public communion service using the reserved sacrament. Some deacons went so far as to say part of the Eucharistic Prayer, sometimes omitting only the words of institution. Even after the 1979 BCP provided rubrics that limited them, many older deacons treated the “deacon’s mass” as a regular form of liturgy.

The years between 1970 and 1979, and indeed until another revision of the ministry canons in 1988, were times of uncertainty and sometimes chaos for deacons – remember that the diaconate in any diocese is defined by the Diocesan Bishop. Some bishops wanted to stay with old and tried ways, others were eager to try anything new. The Diocese of Minnesota had no formation program or guidelines for preparing for diaconate ordination either in groups or privately.

I began formation in the Diocese of Minnesota in 1984. I recall Bishop Anderson hoping for many deacons because his dream was that there would be a communion service at every altar in the diocese every Sunday, and deacons could provide that - although the new rules as of 1983 required that the term Deacon’s Mass be replaced by: HOLY

COMMUNION FROM THE RESERVED SACRAMENT. Most deacons were non-stipendiary, but not all. Deacons presided over marriages and other sacramental events, and were called by the diocesan office to provide Sunday supply at various congregations. There was little supervision except by a very busy Bishop, and deacons were "on their own" a good deal. No doubt they tried to serve their congregations in ways that the congregation wanted and they were comfortable providing. The old perpetual diaconate often cast its shadow.

On April 5, 1989, Sanford Hampton was consecrated Suffragan Bishop of Minnesota. It had been clear from before the election that the new Suffragan would become the supervisor of the deacons. Sandy took his new charge very seriously, and was well acquainted with the provisions of the 1979 BCP and the 1988 ministry canon changes that further separated deacons and priests. He proceeded to "shape up" the ministries of the deacons and bring them into compliance with the Canons. No presiding at services or marriages, no communion from the reserved sacrament except in very limited circumstances, no "priestly" functions. This was the beginning of defining the diaconate by "what deacons cannot do". This change was strongly communicated to the deacons, but little education of priests or congregations was done. The deacons were left to tell their priests and congregations what deacons "couldn't do anymore".

Deacons whose diaconate centered on the altar tended to feel frustrated and many sought the priesthood. Those whose diaconate centered on ministry to the needy and oppressed were more content to remain deacons. Gatherings of deacons became troubled and characterized by anger and resentment, and this was not a helpful "advertisement" for the diaconate.

Shortly after his consecration as Ordinary, Bishop Jelinek imposed a moratorium on the discernment of persons for the diaconate. He was not pleased with the formation programs currently underway, and put together a committee to define a new program. At this time, work on the new canons which would be adopted at General Convention 2003 had already begun, so the eventual program needed little revision after 2003. However, the moratorium and the definition of the diaconate by "what deacons can't do" reduced the interest in considering the order – why would one want to put in two years of intense training and be ordained just so one could wear a collar and read the Gospel? And have to leave their church community to do so? Without any compensation.

Further, Bishop Jelinek's understanding of Eucharist, and his desire to shield the deacon from being pressed into service as an assistant priest, has resulted in decreasing flexibility in liturgical and sacramental roles for the deacon in a congregation, but there has been little attempt to educate priests or congregations about this, so the misunderstanding builds. Most of our congregations have the idea that communion is the thing one expects of clergy, and if one cannot provide that, of what use are they?

About the same time, the concept of Total Ministry (or Mutual Ministry or other titles) became available and encouraged for small/isolated rural congregations. In this concept,

one could become a clergy person and not have to go through a formal formation program in a distant place and not have to leave the congregation. This sounded more and more like the "parish deacon" they had known.

I have now been deacon for seventeen years, and during that time I have been involved in one way or another in multiple projects to "define the diaconate". Maybe we do need a new definition, but if that's ALL we produce, I think it will be unproductive.

My conclusions from all of the above:

We need a definition of the deacon that emphasizes what the deacon's ministry is in positive ways. Continuing to compare priest and deacon on the basis of what the latter cannot do that the former can is counter-productive.

We need some way to educate priests and congregations about the diaconate. It is of interest to me that a survey done in Minnesota congregations in 1984 revealed substantial disconnects of understanding between rector and deacon which neither was apparently aware of. The nature of inquiries I receive from Rectors leads me to believe that is still the case. [I have a brochure on Deacons from the Diocese of Maine, and on the back it says: For more information please consult the Priest in charge of your congregation. I hope some day we could have a brochure on Deacons in Minnesota that could carry the same message on the back!]

We need to convey the Bishop's understanding of the Eucharist, and of priesthood, to congregations so they understand why he places limits on deacons, especially in congregations deprived of regular services of a priest, and so they understand the exceptions he is willing to permit..

We need to be able to relate the diaconate in Total Ministry teams and commissioned lay ministry so discernment can be more focused and more intentional. If the deacon is to be on the margins of the secular community, how do we make the diaconate attractive to a congregation that is putting together a pastoral and sacramental ministry?

We need to recognize that the coming change in the Episcopate could bring an entirely new definition of the diaconate to Minnesota, as it will be the new Bishop's prerogative to define the order of deacons in his/her own way. If we have a definition and can begin dialog with the candidates before election, the transition will certainly be more orderly.

And lastly, if this Diocese is to be focused on Mission, how does the diaconate support and embody that priority?

Commission on Ministry Recommendations Concerning The Diaconate in the Diocese of Minnesota

April 10, 2008

On September 13, 2007 a Commission on Ministry taskforce consisting of the Rev. Paul Allick (priest), Ms. Martha Beckwith, the Rev. Judy Conn (deacon), the Rev. Jan Dougherty (deacon), Ms. Beverly Johnson, the Rev. Gayle Marsh (priest), Mr. Ted Nelson, the Rev. Virginia Padzieski (deacon), the Rev. Phillip Schaffner (deacon), the Rev. Dr. Penelope Warren (priest), and the Ven. Dr. Irma Wyman (Archdeacon), submitted recommendations to the Commission. In anticipation of the search for the next Bishop of Minnesota, the intent of this task force was to develop a document that would review the past and present function of deacons in this diocese and state the Commission's hopes for the future. Thus, at the behest of the Commission, this taskforce sought to create a document that might inform and guide those conducting the search process and those entering into discernment with the Diocese as candidates.

The taskforce was also charged with offering to the Diocese suggestions for the recruitment of explorers in the diaconal discernment process. At the taskforce's recommendation, the Commission presents in Appendix A some recommendations for recruitment and lists some questions that it hopes will be pondered by those chosen as candidates for Bishop.

The following represents COM's best advice as of this writing.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN

Archdeacon Irma Wyman has written a history of the ministry of deacons in this diocese. In it she describes the various ways in which deacons have been used here since General Convention restored functions of the order, for men, in 1952. (A copy of Dr. Wyman's history is attached.) At the end of the history, the Archdeacon offers some conclusions that the Commission finds helpful as it seeks direction on behalf of the Diocese. She writes:

-We need a definition of the deacon that emphasizes what the deacon's ministry is in *positive* ways.

-We need some way to educate priests and congregations about the diaconate.

-We need to convey the current Bishop's understanding of the Eucharist and of the priesthood so that it may be understood why he places limits on deacons.

-We need to recognize that the coming change in the Episcopate could possibly bring an entirely new definition of the diaconate in this diocese.

-If this diocese is to be focused on Mission, we need to consider how the diaconate might support and embody that priority.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW

Diaconal ministry in the diocese is vital and active in many congregations. For example, many Total Ministry teams throughout the diocese include one or more deacons. (Not every team has a deacon) Many more congregations have said they would like to have a deacon if more were available.

There is a diaconal formation program in place. Persons familiar with it see it as comprehensive, well thought-out, diversely instructed, and well-supervised.

Of great concern is the fact that if the median age of our present body of deacons isn't dramatically lowered in the next few years, members of this order will be a scarce commodity in this diocese.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The Commission believes that the Diocese must not lose sight of the fact that the diaconate encompasses a wide spectrum of gifts. We must also keep in mind that diversity of age, gender, racial background, and sexual orientation can only strengthen the diaconate. It is our hope that the Diocese of Minnesota will encompass as many of these gifts as possible.

Accordingly, we hope that, as needed and appropriate, deacons in this diocese may be authorized to exercise the full range of functions permitted their order by national canons.

The Commission's task force was in strong agreement with the views of the Presiding Bishop, The Most Rev. Katherine Jefferts Schori, speaking before the North American Association for the Diaconate on June 22, 2007 in Seattle:

"The ministry of deacons is one of urgency about the starving and homeless and also about the full humanity and dignity of those in all sorts of prisons, whether legal ones, nursing homes or hospices, as well as the prisons we build through prejudice about race, gender, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, national origin, and so many others."

"The Church is recovering the ancient ministry of deacons focused on service connected to the ministry of a bishop despite that some dioceses have not yet or not fully embraced the ministry of deacons. But I want to push us to see those ministries as far more interconnected than we have tended to see them in the past."

"Deacons should not only be middle-aged, silver-haired, retired or independently wealthy. We need to begin to see the gifts [of deacons] in teen-agers. You know the kinds of gifts necessary, and I challenge you to start looking among the youngsters you meet."

Keeping in mind these quotes from the Presiding Bishop, the Commission believes the Diocese needs a much broader discernment process.

Functioning deacons and the priests who are working effectively with them are in a position to present the nature of the order and the marks of a call to it, to disperse the information, and to become resource persons along with others. Mechanisms are needed for the process of conveying such information to others.

The formation process for the diaconate in the Diocese of Minnesota is good. However, when thinking about recruiting younger, more widely geographically based, and more diverse individuals for the diaconate, the Commission and the Diocese need to give more thought to when, where, and how formation is accomplished. The Commission recommends exploring the possibility of providing some of the curriculum on-line, or employing other forms of distance learning. At the same time, the Commission is

concerned not to lose sight of the fact that experience in community with others is a necessary part of formation for ordained ministry.

The Commission also believes that presently deployed deacons need to mentor newly ordained ones.

Finally, the Commission, through its task force, has identified the following questions as of vital importance.

What accommodations are responsible parties willing to make concerning recruitment and formation?

How might a balance between individual “reading for Orders” and formation in community be achieved?

It has been observed that one of the greatest barriers to people responding to a call to the Diaconate is the rule of not returning to one’s home parish upon ordination for at least two years. What are the possibilities for deacons raised up from a particular parish to return immediately to that parish?

How might the Diocese initiate a “curacy” for deacons?

Finally, and in keeping with the last question posed by Archdeacon Wyman in her history, the Commission believes that **as this diocese aspires to be more focused on mission, strengthening the diaconate supports and embodies that priority.**

Appendix A: RECRUITMENT

The Commission believes that the following proposal has a great deal of merit and should be considered seriously. It was submitted by the Rev. Philip Schaffner, building upon the work and experience of the Rev. Howard Anderson at St. Paul's Duluth (See Appendix B). Deacon Schaffner wrote:

In addition to some larger diocesan-wide education efforts (clergy conference, diocesan convention, weekly news of the diocese, etc.), we would identify a limited number of congregations (5-10) for a more intensive relationship. The hope being that these congregations might produce 3-5 or more deacons over the next 5 years. This intensive, strategic effort could yield 15 - 50 new deacons. [The issue has been that the congregation would want all 3-5 deacons to return to them immediately.]

These congregations would ideally be healthy congregations with a deacon or history of having a deacon, and priests supportive of the diaconate who have a positive history with deacons and/or the formation process. For example, one congregation could be St. Mary's in St. Paul where I was discerned from and where Rex McKee did his internship.

The process would be to have a face-to-face conversation with the priest and visits to the vestry and outreach committees. Another possibility would be an adult [education] forum on the diaconate and/or newsletter article(s). Then the priest and others would be asked to spend some time in prayer asking for the spirit to name potential deacons. These individuals would then be directly contacted by their priest or another suitable person either face-to-face over coffee or in a personal letter followed by a phone call.

Although this process will be time-intensive, it has great benefits including new relationships and partnerships.

[This approach only works if the priest is both knowledgeable about and dedicated to the diaconate.]

The Commission believes that implementing this would be a useful start. It also sees a need to look at options as to how such a program would feed into

smaller congregations. It is noted that the proposed plan does not exclude other congregations. Nothing in it would preclude any other congregation from identifying individuals who would do well to explore a possible call to the diaconate.

Appendix B: Parish Discernment Process at St. Paul's Duluth

Bishop Jelinek once made the statement that the most spiritually exciting time in his ministry in each of his parishes was when people were in discernment. This was also true of the time in the life of St. Paul's when people were in discernment for Holy Orders. Because St. Paul's has grown from a program size congregation into a corporation size parish, the need for small groups was clear. Our instinct was that those who served on the discernment committees would benefit greatly and deepen their own spiritual journey by taking part in the committee. They would also have some of their intimacy needs met by getting to know other St. Paulites in depth during the year of discernment. We certainly were correct about that!

The staff team put their heads together and began thinking about who might be prime candidates for discernment. The team was made up of both priests, both of the deacons assigned at that time, the director of lay ministry and the senior warden. Independently they developed lists of those in the parish who had been mentioned as people who might be in a spiritual ferment and growth phase of their lives, and therefore open to the calling of the Holy Spirit and the Church to pursue discernment. The lists were remarkably similar.

Because there is an acute need for more deacons in the Duluth area, it must be said that many of those making up the lists were thinking about people who seemed to possess the qualities of a good deacon. But the stated goals were to discern a group of people for ministry - not specifically the diaconate or priesthood, but ministry.

The Rector wrote a personal letter to each of the twenty (20) people who appeared on most of the lists, asking them to consider entering into ministry discernment using the diocesan process. They were asked to meet with one of the clergy for an initial discussion of this possibility.

After these visits, ten (10) people accepted the call to go forward with the discernment process. They were reminded that this was a time to look at all the possibilities for ministry - both lay and ordained.

The clergy and the lay ministry director met to select people from the parish as well as the wider community to be on the discernment committees. The candidates looked at the proposed committee members and were asked for input and additions. Careful work was done to form the committees to meet the individual personality and needs of each candidate, as well as challenge them.

The committees were formed according to the "Handbook for Holy Orders" for the Diocese of Minnesota.

By this point there were over 100 people involved in the process - either as candidates or as members of the committees. All of these people met together one evening for the initial training by a member of the Commission on Ministry; the training person is a member of the parish and continued to be available to the committees during the year. In order to maintain confidentiality, it was not disclosed in the initial large gathering who were candidates and who were committee members. After the large group meeting, people met in their small groups indicated by a color on their name tag. In this meeting, that night, they did introductions, selected a chair, and decided on a day and place to meet.

The groups organized themselves in creative ways. Most met at the church, but some met in homes, one in another Episcopal church, and some had roving meeting places. They followed the instructions in the handbook and were given plans which had been successfully used by other committees for meeting the requirements.

From the original ten groups, there were varied outcomes. Two groups met only once because the candidates realized that they were not ready to go on. Their committee members who were interested in being in another group were reassigned. Two candidates moved out of the area during the process. Two people decided to continue their lay ministry and four people were discerned to have a call to the diaconate, continued the diocesan process, and are now Postulants and are attending a formation class.

In addition to presenting four persons as Postulants for the diaconate, many other good things happened from the whole process. Many friendships grew among committee members and some committees continue to meet informally. Each committee had as a member a high school student. These students were important to their groups and many formed new relationships with adults in the parish. Committee members from other faith communities gained insight into the Episcopal Church, and offered us valuable insights about ourselves. One person from another faith has begun to attend church. The experience of asking and struggling with spiritual questions and faith journeys has spilled over into the rest of the parish formation activities and been stimulating for clergy, staff, and parishioners.

We would encourage other parishes to look at this model. It involves hard work on the part of all those involved. There are more pastoral questions for clergy from both candidates and committee members, there are scheduling questions, there are

issues of confidentiality and hurt feelings; these issues are minor compared to the new spirit that swept through our parish family, and the spiritual growth we continue to build on.