

*The School for Deacons*

# **Foundational Concepts of Deacons**

**Diaconal Discernment Kit**

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# Foundational Concepts of Deacons

Who is the Deacon in our midst? How do we find and call that person?

Here are some core assumptions.

## Baptismal Ecclesiology

- All baptized persons are fully equipped for the ministry of the Good News to and for God's people in the church and in the world
- The call to ministry of God's people, including the call to serve (diakonia) is made explicit in and embraced through the Baptismal Covenant
- Specific orders of ministry exist to provide distinctive focus, vision, and leadership for all people in their various ministries; none is "better" or "superior / inferior"
- There are elements of episcopal, presbyteral, and diaconal charism for ministry present in everyone: some are especially called to embody one of them to help lead and catalyze the full ministry of all

# **The Diaconate is a Full and Equal Order of Ministry**

- Deacons are an ancient, scripturally founded order in the church
- Deacons are not secondary, subsidiary, inhibited, dependent, or incomplete
- Deacons are professionals— called, trained, formed, and ordained to a distinctive ministry in the church and the world

## **Key Descriptions of Deacons Based on the Ordination Service**

### **Frequent Personifications of the Deacon**

- A person ordained to lead and live out the Servant Ministry of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world
- An icon -- inviting model and image -- of Servanthood in the life and worship of the congregation
- A bridge between the church as gathered, worshiping community and the pain, needs, and brokenness of the world
- A prophet of social justice and compassionate action, calling all the people of God to live the servant ministry of their Baptismal Covenant
- A leader, teacher, and nurturer of the church's social ministry

# **The Role of the Deacon**

Key phrases from the charge in the ordination service for deacons lay out the life of diaconal ministry. Deacons are called to...

## ***1. A Special Ministry of Servanthood Directly Under the Bishop***

- A key relationship (historically and today): a voice of support for the bishop's vision for social ministry
- The expression of servant ministry as leadership
- The willingness and ability to move and to go where sent
- The freedom from parochial limitations

## ***2. Serve All People (in the name of Christ), Particularly the Poor, the Weak, the Sick, and the Lonely***

By extension, they also serve the marginalized, the alien, the ostracized, rejected, ignored, despised, and forgotten. The deacon primarily focuses to ensure that ALL God's people have a place at the banquet table; therefore, the diaconate is a ministry that makes concrete the inclusiveness of the Gospel.

## ***3. Study Holy Scripture, to Seek Nourishment and Model One's Life on Them***

Diaconal ministry is profoundly grounded in scripture, and deacons are called to a strong scriptural practice and profession. Where

deacons are charged to find and live their lives and ministries out of the Word, priests are charged to use scripture as a resource. To embody the Gospel that deacons proclaim, deacons must live deeply into it.

#### ***4. Make Christ's Redeeming Love Known to All Among Whom They Live, Work, and Worship***

Diaconal ministry is exercised in the faith community AND in the household AND in the workplace- at the same time. Servanthood is a signature in all these arenas of life for the Deacon. In this way, the deacon leads all the baptized by example.

#### ***5. Interpret to the Church the Needs, Hopes, and Concerns of the World***

The Deacon is often called a bridge; has one foot in the church and the other in the world. This is so that the gathered community is always mindful of, holds up in prayer, and responds to in life the pain, brokenness, and hunger of the wider world.

#### ***6. Assist in Public Worship***

Deacons model a role of service and proclamation in liturgy. Note that this is part of the charge, but only part. The Deacon's role is always subsumed under service and is an arena for modeling and speaking the diaconal message. A Deacon is not primarily a liturgical person.

***7. At all times, in Life and Teaching, Show Christ's People that in Serving the Helpless, They serve Christ***

Deacons "show" [hence the language of Deacon as "icon"] and teach the baptized how to live out the Baptismal Covenant.

## **Stages of Discernment and Critical Questions**

### **How does a process of discerning diaconal ministry unfold?**

The growing self awareness of a diaconal call AND the process of noticing the potential diaconal ministry of oneself or a person in one's faith community involves an evolution of servant ministry from...

### **Awareness to Action to Embodiment to Iconic Leadership**

It may look something like this...

1. Do you sense— for yourself OR someone in the life and ministry of a person in your congregation or community—a strong pull [call] to notice Need and Pain in the world?
  - o Is this the person who looks out and sees what is amiss in the picture of life as it is lived around them?

- Is this the person who continually brings up questions about hunger, poverty, the neglected, the lonely, the ill, the hurt, the unjust, the unfair, etc. in otherwise pleasant or innocuous conversations?
- 2. Furthermore, are you the one/is this the person who wants to do something about what the need and pain seen? Are you/they the one who asks, in the church community, "What are we going to? What can we do about it?"
- 3. And then do you /does this person seek to draw others into compassionate action? Do you/they lead by example? Do you/they delegate, share, or clearly have the capacity to do so? Do you/they want to do more than fix an isolated instance but rather look for the bigger picture, recurrent problems, address causation, think in a systemic rather than isolated way?
- 4. Are you/they, can you /they speak up, be articulate, communicate, and persuade? Can you/they draw others into a vision of servanthood? Is this a person whom others will follow, trust, and look to for guidance in ministry?
- 5. Are you/they confident and comfortable doing liturgy? In whatever roles you/they now hold in liturgy (acolyte, reader, Lay Eucharistic Minister., Chalice Bearer, etc.) are you/they able to do their part and perform without anxiety? Is being "on" in front of the people an easy place to be? Are you/they effective? And given all that, are you/they NOT obsessed with doing liturgy?

6. Can you/they lead, be a focal point, and then step aside to let ministry of the priest and people happen? You/they don't need to be a hero, but do need to see that the job gets done--more and better by more and more folk.
7. Do you/they have a scripturally grounded spirituality with the Bible firmly incorporated in personal spiritual practice?
8. Do you/they have a clear, active, and articulate SENSE OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL JUSTICE?

### **Some Key Questions to Ask of Those in the Process of Discernment**

1. Do you feel a call to preside, to be at the center gathering and nurturing a congregation? Are you drawn to deep pastoral engagement with fellow congregants one-on-one? [If so, your call is primarily presbyteral]
2. Do you feel a call to act on a particular expression of servant ministry (making LEM visits, cooking at a feeding program, visiting a prisoner, tutoring a disadvantaged child, etc. etc.)? [If this is the extent of it, i.e. there is no organizing, leading, mobilizing, communicating, empowering, etc. then your call is primarily a lay calling.]
3. Why choose service and not sacrament? What does that distinction mean to you?
4. Why do you want or need to lead and not simply engage in direct action?

5. Do others look to you/to this person-- think of them first, when service ministry needs to be done? When a project arises, do you think, "so and so is the one to ask?"
6. Do you/they...
  - o have experience at
  - o enjoy doing
  - o feel called to
  - o take comfort in the prospect of

... organizing group efforts to meet needs?
7. Can you/they be in the [very seductive] spotlight in the midst of the congregation--[particularly in doing liturgy] , and then walk to the margins of the community to do your job?
8. Are you willing, permanently, to give up, give to the faith community and the needy world a piece of your life (time, freedom, discretion)? If not, then what do you think ordination entails and why would you seek it?
9. Can you take orders [from the Bishop and the Archdeacon for Deacons] and live with the outcomes?

## **Appendix: Some Quotes from Deacons who have graduated from the School for Deacons**

"Many of the skills of a Deacon--like those of a hospital chaplain -- can be learned (thank God, literally) whereas you can't teach passion -- passionate love for everything that is -- and an innate

sense of justice and the willingness to put your money where your mouth is."

"Look below the surface (of the person) at the POTENTIAL!"

"...stress two central issues-- the need for dedication to unrecognized service . . . and the personal cost to and involvement of the candidate, spouse, and the larger family."

## **Advice**

"Be open to dreams . . . look for an open and honest partnership in the development of individual gifts."

"Write a personal spiritual autobiography to see a call and a sense of direction."

"Look for ministry in a person that is seeking completeness."

"Identify those in the congregation who show signs of leadership in service."

"The defining role of the deacon is to model and point to a Christian life of service in the world and in the church."