

God's Mission Takes Deacons
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When St. Augustine wrote, "My heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee," his words helped generations of restless hearts pinpoint their longing for God. Sometimes churches grow restless as well, and need to remember this path that St. Augustine describes. Church restlessness abounds these days. Boredom or dissatisfaction may surface when a committee meets or in parking lot discussions after a worship service. When leaders desperately seek and urgently promote every new program, staking their faith on its promise to move their congregations to the next level, a kind of restlessness is evident. St. Augustine's testimony gives wise guidance to our restless churches. When Christ is the center of church life, congregations experience the grace they need.

When Christ is the center of the church, self-giving love inspires and guides its life and work. Christ's life and spirit become the criteria by which we discern what matters and what we will do. When Christ is the center of the church, we see possibilities we would otherwise miss. We recognize that Christ invites people to the table that we tend to overlook. We notice Christ nudging us to speak truth in love when we prefer staying silent. We take Christ's words to love God with our mind, as well as with our heart, soul and strength seriously and find this kind of spiritual education life-giving. When Christ is the center of the church those looking to rest in God find their home. As biblical and contemporary stories describe, however, even when Christ is present, God's people often wander from this spiritual center that they need.

Diakonia: Ministry with Christ at the Center

This rhythm of restless seeking, then finding rest in God, plays throughout the Church's unfolding story from its first days described in Acts until now. An experience of the Christ life often becomes a path home when God's people lose their way. When the Early Church grows restless in Acts 6, and tensions rise among the growing congregation, God creates deacons to help the church

experience the Christ life. By doing this God reminds this young body that Christ and Christ's servant ministry are the source and future of its life together. The inspired decision to ordain Greek deacons to care for the Hellenists who feel that their widows are being neglected furthers God's mission. David Pao writes that it was not until Cornelius' conversion account "that the connection between table fellowship and the proclamation of the Word can be understood . . . It is their status as 'waiters' that allows the Seven to continue the mission of Jesus in becoming "preachers" to the outcasts and the oppressed."¹

The basic meaning of *diakonos* in secular Greek was "servant," meaning one engaged in menial tasks, particularly food service. While *diakonos* and other related terms that refer to the church office of deacon occur five times in the New Testament, Jesus often used these words in the Gospel to describe a way of acting and illustrated their meaning through his own servanthood, giving them new significance. The Epistles picked up on the word *diakonia* and applied it to a wide range of church activities.²

By using the word *diakonos* in Acts 6, the writer links the office of serving those who were neglected to the act of serving Christ by continuing the ministry that was Jesus' focus. St. Ignatius reminds deacons that they have been entrusted with Christ's *diakonia*³. T.F. Torrance reminds us that "God gives what He commands and commands what he gives. He commands a service of love and he gives the love that empowers that service . . . Diakonia of this unique kind is possible only because the Lord himself has come in the form of a servant. Only in Jesus (do) we learn what diakonia really is . . . For this reason the Early Church saw delineated in the deacon's office more than anywhere else the likeness of

¹ David W. Pao, "Waiters or Preachers: Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan Table Fellowship Motif," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 No 1 (Spr 2011): 143-44.

² Owen F. Cummings, review of *A New Friendship: The Spirituality and Ministry of the Deacon*, by Edward L. Buelt, *Worship* 85 No. 4 (JI 2011): 383.

³ G.W.H. Lampe, "Diakonia in the Early Church," in *Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday*, ed. James I. McCord, and T.H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1966), 61.

Jesus, the servant of the Lord.”⁴ In serving on behalf of Christ, we actually serve Christ and experience Christ.

What today’s Church needs, stresses Torrance, is “a massive recovery of authentic diakonia if it is to hold forth the image of Christ before (human)kind and is to minister the mercy of God to the needs of (people)in the deep root of their evil and in the real sting of their misery.”⁵

Over the course of church history the role and form of deacon ministry changes, but the purpose for which God created deacons, to extend Christ’s ministry into the world while giving the world a picture of Christ as it does so, remains essential for the Church.

Deacons in the Catholic Church

When the first deacons served the Hellenist widows in Acts 6, they were not simply easing tensions and saving time for the apostles. Catholics understood that deacons serve as an icon of Christ, representing the Suffering Servant by identifying with the suffering, the poor and the marginalized. Through a spiritual relationship with Christ, deacons are able to serve in this way. As Edward Buelt writes, “A deacon who has allowed joy to die in (their) ministry cannot luminously represent Christ the High Priest. For this joy to develop in a deep and spiritually profound fashion, emphasis is properly laid on continual formation.”⁶

From its earliest beginnings the Church understood that *diakonia* is “the Church’s service of its Lord in person—the most intimate and personal service of Him that it is permitted to render.” The Church understands “... it is the needy who are conferring a favour upon it, in that by their distress they present it with the opportunity to love and serve Him, to whom it owes more than it can every repay.” This Christ-centered understanding recognizes that Christ Himself...is personally—though hiddenly and mysteriously—present in the needy, which makes it impossible for the believing Church ever to regard or treat them as merely

⁴ T.F. Torrance, “Service in Jesus Christ,” in *Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday*, 3-4.

⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁶ Edward L. Buelt, *A New Friendship: The Spirituality and Ministry of the Deacon* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 151.

so many cases of poverty, malnutrition or disease. For others they may perhaps be a problem to be solved, a political, social or economic untidiness to be cleared up, a potential danger to be neutralized: for the Christian Church they must always remain persons, whose status as persons is guaranteed by the mystery disclosed in Matthew 25:33ff.”⁷

In the third and early fourth centuries deacons had greater influence in the Catholic Church. Because of Acts 6 there were only seven deacons in each parish, regardless of its size. Each Roman deacon had a sub-deacon. By the fourth century the number of deacons grew and they became apprentice priests, a low rung in the clerical hierarchy that became a sphere of training for the priesthood.

Women shared forms of deacon ministry. In the East they were ordained in services that used prayers which referenced Old Testament prophetesses. In the West they were not ordained, but were part of an order that involved prayer and caring for widows.⁸

By the Middle Ages deacons were worship leaders, and the role became a step towards ordination for the priesthood. Catholics currently maintain the historic form of this office while also opening the role to married men who may serve parishes as worship leaders, but have no authority to preside over the mass.

Deacons after the Reformation

Deacons in Protestant churches became lay leaders rather than clergy members after the Reformation. Luther and Calvin emphasized the biblical role of deacons as servants, with a focus on delivering assistance and support to the poor and needy. This emphasis was more than a job description or a set of good deeds. “Too often the ‘rich’ and ‘healthy’ Christian has condescended in ‘diaconic paternalism’ to the less fortunate—to improve his condition, to make him feel good or to convert him. As a result the real point of diakonia has been missed. Primarily the poor and the sick does not need me, but I need him,” writes Frederick Herzog. “Is it not in the poor and sick that I meet Christ and in this encounter learn to love with the love of God? Is it not in the lowliness of the outcast that I am

⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, “Diakonia in the New Testament,” in *Service in Christ*, 42-43.

⁸ G.W.H. Lampe, “Diakonia in the Early Church,” in *Service in Christ*, 61-63.

confronted with God's very being? *Diakonia* makes us ponder in action the mystery of the relationship between suffering and God.”⁹

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Protestant churches shifted the responsibilities of their deacons to include more administrative and supervisory duties, including overseeing the work of the pastor. Deacons often served as a board of directors, sometimes screening recommendations for the congregation. “Controversies surrounding that shift are long-standing,” writes Marvin McMickle.¹⁰ “Our understanding of the role and responsibilities of the deacon in the Baptist Church in general and in the black Baptist church in particular has come to a critical crossroad.”¹¹

Growing congregations, complex ministries, and the ownership of church buildings are a few reasons for this shift in role. What started with a table of Hellenist widows now includes facilities that may even contain a trendy coffee shop. While the shift may seem reasonable, Howard Foshee laments the fact that the term “board of deacons” was ever coined and suggests this is “foreign to how Baptists should work together.” According to McMickle, “The historic tension between deacon as servant leader and deacon as boss of both church and pastor is alive and at work in black Baptist churches.”¹²

Such tension or restlessness in the church could provide an opportunity and context for spiritual growth and re-centering. If deacon ministries shift from their biblical model, where will this essential witness to Christ now be located in the church? What spiritual opportunities do deacons lose with this shift? Many churches create new positions, such as trustee boards, to manage consuming financial matters, freeing deacons to focus on the important work of *diakonia*.

The Experience of Deacon Renewal

Susanne Watson Epting, Director of the North American Association for the Diaconate, writes with the wisdom of someone who has seen a ministry

⁹ Frederick Herzog, “Diakonia in Modern Times,” in *Service in Christ*, 150.

¹⁰ Marvin A. McMickle, *Deacons in Today's Black Baptist Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2010), 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38-40.

transformed. She describes how the deacon renewal in her denomination was part of a church-wide transformation in which Anglicans revised their Prayer Book, rooted their theology in baptism and raised the bar of their spiritual formation programs. This renewal led to a new kind of deacon, but “new in an old way-- more like those of the early church who served to extend the bishop’s office, who served the poor, who brought the needs of the community before the bishop and the larger church, who aided in distribution--of money, of food, of other goods, and even of communion, as well as proclaiming, witnessing and interpreting.”¹³ Epting explains that this created a “renewed understanding of the place of deacon in the midst of the larger body of Christ, as leader but companion, as ordained to an order and not a rank.”¹⁴ Her hope is that deacons will be trained to provide leadership in relation to God’s mission, and says that the revision of the Prayer Book called the church to new forms of leadership. Acts of service alone were helpful, but not enough.

“We ordain deacons not to a particular form of diaconal ministry,” she says. “We ordain deacons because we believe it is important to acknowledge the servant nature of Christ’s church . . . the call for living reminders that we are all called to Christ-like service at baptism . . . not only to provide nurture, sacramental sustenance, and fellowship to its members, but to be the church outside its walls in mission, witness and service.”¹⁵

Deacons know where the church is needed outside our walls, not to reach down, but out. The work we share with Christ is part of the way we experience grace. Epting continues, “We need to understand that God’s church doesn’t have a mission. God’s mission has a church!”¹⁶ Deacons stand at the intersection between service and spirituality, which means making connections between being in love with God and sharing that love in concrete ways. Making those connections requires a deep and abiding love for God and for all of God’s people.”¹⁷

¹³ Susanne Watson Epting, “Common Vows and Common Mission,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92:1 (December 2010), 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79..

In the deacon ministry that Epting describes, diaconal leadership asks hard questions concerning the church's mission as a servant structure, and knows the language of culture well enough to facilitate dialogue between that culture and the church. "Engaging in mission has to do with conversion as much as it does with action," according to Epting. "Diaconal leadership is willing to know the world deeply enough to be able to interpret it. It is willing to invite the church to dismantle what gets in the way of mission—whether sacred cow or inertia . . ." ¹⁸

When God's Mission has a Church

"The real crisis in the life of the Church today," writes Alan Brash, "is surely our discovery, under the guidance of the Word of God, and under the disciplines of worldly movements around us, that God is not calling us to be 'more religious' but to a persistent caring for His world and His children. We need to discover and confess that we had ceased to care about the life of the world."¹⁹

"There is more at issue than the finding of new answers to the practical and difficult question of institutions," proclaims Brash. ²⁰ We must rediscover our place in working with God as God suffers to redeem the world. We must see our service as a deep involvement in God's redeeming activity in the world.

McMickle reminds us that when our churches seek to understand the role and responsibilities of the deacon and "begin with 'the office,' then they may quickly end up with people seeking to fill a position that has become associated with a certain degree of authority and influence. If, on the other hand, we start the discussion as Acts 6 does--with the need that existed and 'the service' to be offered to the community--then the discussion moves to an entirely different direction. 'What can I do for you?' takes the place of 'This is what I expect you to do.' Right from the very start, Acts 6 places the focus on a service that needs to be accomplished rather than on a position of power that needs to be filled."²¹

As part of the deacon renewal that Epting witnessed, churches decided that every meeting would begin with the question, "What are we doing for the poor?"

¹⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹ Alan Brash, "The Church's Diakonia in the Modern World," in *Service in Christ*, 205.

²⁰ Ibid., 204.

²¹ McMickle, *Deacons*, 5.

While such a question occasionally felt like a distraction, and was initially met with resistance, churches persisted in this endeavor until it became a seed of transformation in the churches' ministry. What would happen if every deacon meeting in every church began with someone persistently asking the kind of question that Christ would ask us, or have us ask each other?

How would the conversation around such questions change the agenda of our meetings and the work that we plan and do? In what new ways would we experience the presence of Christ in our ministries and in those meetings? Would we realize the truth that God's Church does not have a mission, but God's mission has a church? Would we remember that Christ is the center of all ministry, and that when we grow restless, that center is where we find our rest?

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