

## Chapter Five

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This research project attempted to deal with an enormous amount of data covering a wide range of issues in the American diaconate in five denominations. Three insights stand out as perhaps the most significant. First, the differences between “educational emphasis” and “current benefit” ratings are remarkable for their similarities across denominations. Evangelism, Preaching/Proclamation, and Pastoral Care were the areas which showed the greatest disparity between educational emphasis and current benefit. The data suggests that denominations could benefit from emphasizing these areas to a greater extent in their educational programs. The proposed ecumenical resource center could play a key role in this effort.

The second important finding is that respondents rated Spiritual Direction, Retreat Opportunities, and Continuing Education Specific to Expertise as the three most helpful areas of continuing education. There are ways of converging an emphasis on spiritual direction with the area of pastoral care in which respondents felt they would like more education. Preaching workshops could also be provided in a retreat setting. Such preaching workshops could emphasize preaching social justice themes or preaching at special events such as funerals or weddings or baptisms – rites that are often led by members of the diaconate.

The third important finding of this research project is the disparity between deacons’ overwhelming feelings of “least effectiveness” in the area of social action/social justice work and denominational teaching which tends to emphasize this dimension of diaconal identity a great deal. Greater efforts should be made in supporting members of the diaconate in gaining more education in these areas. This aspect of the deacon’s identity is a prophetic one which will not

be easily accepted by many in the church. The temptation always exists to devote more time and energy to caring for people within the church than to reach out to the poor and disenfranchised of the world. The deacon's task is to do both in his/her acts of liturgical leadership and service.

The results of this survey project indicate that there is indeed an ecumenical opportunity for mutual strengthening of the diaconate in all denominations. An ecumenical challenge also exists to reconcile different educational emphases and different areas of ministry strength which are found in each of the denominations. The Anglican-Lutheran International Commission's *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, has discovered the benefits of tackling difficult ecclesiological issues from the perspective of Christian mission. This research project is an attempt to provide some of the background information to continue and expand this dialogue for the diaconate in other denominations as well. The proposed ecumenical resource center for the diaconate is one hopeful vehicle for such continued dialogue.

Many of the implications and a thorough interpretation of the results have not been fully explained in this report and will require input from denominational leaders and other diaconate representatives from all the traditions. Nevertheless, this study can assist ecumenical participants in building relationships which are based on an honest assessment of each denomination's understanding and practice regarding the diaconate.

### **Areas for Further Research**

1. As discussed in the Methodology chapter there is ample room for further exploration of qualitative data which this research endeavor has collected in the form of interviews with members of the diaconate. Salient quotes from those interviews would no doubt help to provide a "human face" to much of the statistical information present in this report.

2. Specifically, some of the qualitative answers obtained in the survey instrument could also be more closely analyzed for common themes of hope/concern for the future of the diaconate. The assessment of these responses was more impressionistic for this project. A more sophisticated coding scheme could be developed which would add a degree of precision not present in this project in its analysis of the qualitative data.
3. This project was limited in scope to the U.S. context. Similar studies examining the growth or decline of the diaconate in other countries would also be helpful. The proposed ecumenical study center for the diaconate could also benefit from continued networking with the European diaconate centers – both Protestant and Roman Catholic.
4. The historical and theological writings on the diaconate have not been fully taken into consideration in this research project beyond its brief review of the literature. Greater reflection is needed which combines a detailed analysis of this data with an historical and theological assessment of the diaconate. Such reflection is crucial for the future development of the diaconate.