

## Chapter Four

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the major findings in a more detailed fashion than the previous chapter and to suggest implications of this research project for the diaconate in each of the denominations as well as the proposed ecumenical resource center for the diaconate. After a general discussion of the demographic differences among the denominations, this chapter discusses each of the research questions presented in Chapter Two.

#### *General Demographics*

The gender distribution in each of the denominations studied varies considerably. There are a variety of reasons for this including some denominations' historical practice of not permitting women to be ordained. In such denominations women often sought consecration as deaconesses in order to fulfill a special ministry in the church. Late nineteenth century deaconess movements in Europe and in the U.S. are a common historical connection for the diaconate in all the denominations studied in this project although it is a more indirect influence upon the modern Roman Catholic diaconate. The Roman Catholic Church only permits male deacons to be ordained.<sup>1</sup>

Since the ELCA, Episcopal, and United Methodist churches now permit women to be ordained as presbyters, the tendency for the diaconate to be comprised solely of women is gradually changing. The book celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Diakonia World Federation discussed the increase in the number of men entering the diaconate.<sup>2</sup> How this change will affect the Diakonia World Federation and the diaconate's self-understanding is unclear at this point in time but clearly in need of further reflection.

There is a long history of uneasy relationships between women's organizations in the church and the rest of a denomination's structure, which may be instructive for leaders in the diaconate movement to consider in greater depth. For example, women's missionary societies (often led by deaconesses) in the early twentieth century were frequently absorbed into male-dominated structures within the organization, thus changing the social space women had to carry out their ministry. This can be observed most strongly, perhaps, within Methodism, as deaconess training institutions became absorbed by the denomination's seminaries – often serving as seminaries' Christian Education and Social Work departments.<sup>3</sup>

The diaconate movement across denominations is not an exclusively women's area of ministry, even though some diaconal organizations may understandably choose to maintain this distinction. As women gain recognition as ordained presbyters in many denominations it is plausible that men will correspondingly seek acceptance in diaconate movements. Ecumenical dialogue with the male Roman Catholic diaconate may also move the other predominantly female diaconates toward more balanced male/female participation. The denominations studied in this survey project have significantly different views on women in ministry and it would be wise for the proposed ecumenical resource center to reflect on how these differences may impact the work which the resource center undertakes.

There appears to be some correlation between the exclusively female diaconate of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and the apparent aging of their diaconal community. Almost half of Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod deaconesses have been deaconesses for over twenty years. The other denominations seem to have more equal age distributions in their diaconates. The reasons for the lack of new deaconesses in this denomination should be explored further.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their primary place of work (church, non-church agency, etc.)?**

The phrasing of question six in the survey allowed for some interpretation by the respondent. Question #6 asks, “Are you paid for the work you do as a deacon?” Respondents appeared to interpret this question differently, likely depending on whether they perceived their places of employment as places where they were expressing their diaconal identity. Some respondents clearly differentiated between a “secular” job and the work they do as deacons (e.g. visitation, “volunteer” work, etc.). Other respondents added marginal notes on their survey indicating that they are always a deacon and since their job pays them money they are, in fact, paid for the work they do as a deacon. Despite these variations in interpretation the question is valuable in ascertaining a self-understanding of the respondents’ work situation.

The dramatic differences between United Methodists on the one hand and Episcopalian and Roman Catholic deacons on the other in respondents’ perception of being paid for the work they do, illustrates what might be considered a greater “professionalized identity” among United Methodist deacons. Roman Catholic and Episcopal deacons largely view their work as volunteer in nature. The high formal education experience among deacons in United Methodism may also contribute to their expectations of being paid for their work. There are clearly strengths and weaknesses to both stipendiary and non-stipendiary work in the diaconate and these should be explored in ecumenical conversations.

The United Methodist deacons are also most commonly employed and paid in church settings. This social location for United Methodist deacons has implications for an order which seeks to be “between church and world,” or focused on the interrelationship of worship and service. A perfect balance between worship and service, however, is not a mandate for a perfect

balance between church and non-church contexts of a person's work. A person with a strong missionary impulse may be just as effective in mission to "the world" in a church context as someone working primarily in a community agency. Among Protestant denominations which derive their heritage from the German Pietist diaconal movements, a greater ecclesial presence may be a helpful balance. Many of the diaconal communities in Germany which currently operate massive social service agencies within a large welfare state struggle to understand their ecclesial identity. The proposed ecumenical training center for the diaconate should provide a context for discussing the diaconate's vision for worship and service in the world.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their education/formation experiences and the perceived current benefit of those experiences?**

The greater amount of formal education for United Methodist deacons contrasts with other denominations which are largely similar to one another in deacons' formal educational experiences. How does this level of education help or hinder the United Methodist diaconate? Is this level of education seen as unnecessarily high, perhaps causing some excellent candidates to not pursue their vocation? These questions are also applicable for the diaconate in other denominations as well. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is in the process of increasing its educational standards for the diaconate which is particularly difficult for those diocese which are located a greater distance from a seminary.

The overall educational emphasis and perceived current benefit of various categories of education reveals several interesting patterns. One of the more striking patterns is the uniformly low educational emphasis placed on evangelism among all denominations. This is a difficult category to measure because of its tendency to be defined quite broadly in some circles and quite

narrowly in others. Pope Paul VI's 1975 encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, for example, defined evangelism in such a way as to broaden its meaning as the church's "deepest identity."

Thus for example, evangelization has been defined as consisting in the proclamation of Christ Our Lord to those who do not know him, in preaching, catechetics, baptism and the administration of the other sacraments. But no such defective and incomplete definition can be accepted for that complex, rich and dynamic reality which is called evangelization without the risk of weakening or even distorting its real meaning.<sup>4</sup>

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* was also identified in a 1996 study as the most frequently utilized in preaching and teaching by Catholic deacons. Among the denominations, the Roman Catholics also rated evangelism the highest in educational emphasis.

Regardless of how evangelism is defined, the low value placed on it in educational efforts, according to this survey's results, is reason for reflection. Is evangelism being emphasized "across the curriculum" in such a way that it was not appropriately measured in this survey, or is evangelism not embraced as integral to the vocation of the diaconate? The traditional identification of the evangelist martyr, Stephen, as one of the first deacons warrants placing a stronger emphasis on evangelism. The unique role of deacons' vocation in the church and world would also suggest that evangelistic efforts should be a more integral part of diaconal identity. These and other questions are worth exploring for educational leaders in all the denominations.

The disparity among denominations in their educational emphasis is greatest in the areas of Spiritual Formation, Pastoral Care, Liturgy, Preaching/Proclamation, and Church Polity. The educational differences in Liturgy and Preaching/Proclamation are understandable given the historic tendency in some denominations not to permit women members of the diaconate to preach or lead other aspects of the liturgy. The Lutheran denominations and the United Methodists have the strongest heritage of deaconess communities in the United States. This

heritage helps to explain why United Methodists and members of the diaconate from both Lutheran denominations ranked “educational emphasis” low for preaching and liturgy.

United Methodist deacons rank the lowest in terms of educational emphasis in four of the five areas with the largest gaps. They also rank the highest in educational emphasis for Church Polity. The correspondingly high “current benefit” rating for Church Polity suggests that United Methodist deacons find such a high emphasis helpful for their current ministry. United Methodist diaconal ministers have mostly been certified in particular areas such as Christian Education, music ministry, church administration, and youth work. These certification programs have tended to downplay the liturgical and preaching role for the diaconate.

More than half a point also separates the United Methodist deacons from all others in the categories of Spiritual Formation and Pastoral Care. This distance is more puzzling than the distance present for liturgy or preaching. The distance from the other denominations’ scores, however, is greatly reduced for Spiritual Formation and Pastoral Care in the “current benefit” ratings. This suggests that United Methodist deacons would value more education in these areas.

When the “educational emphasis” and “current benefit” ratings are separated by denomination (see Figures 9 through 13) further patterns emerge which reveal the disparities between the two ratings. Evangelism, Preaching/Proclamation, and Pastoral Care appear to have the greatest disparity in respondents’ ratings for all denominations. This suggests that an ecumenical resource center for the diaconate might initially focus on these three items in an effort to reduce the perceived gap between educational emphasis and what members of the diaconate believe would be most beneficial for their life of ministry.

The United Methodist diaconate shows the most disparity in educational emphasis and current benefit ratings of all the denominations. This ought not come as a surprise since the

diaconate in United Methodism has undergone the most recent changes in its ordering of ministry. The disparities between liturgy and proclamation are most understandable since prior to 1996 diaconal ministers could not officiate at weddings and funerals and were generally not perceived as preaching a great deal. After 1996, with the change from lay to ordained status, the liturgical role and preaching role has become more prominent as deacons are now permitted to officiate at weddings and funerals.

The United Methodists, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics are all at some stage in revising or just putting into practice new educational norms for members of the diaconate. In the case of the United Methodist diaconate there have been few deacons who have completed the current course of study which will be required for persons entering the diaconate in upcoming years. The Roman Catholic bishops in the U.S. are also in the process of reviewing the norms for education of their deacons. It would be valuable to compare the findings of this survey project with the new emphases in education currently being discussed.

**What educational resources have been most helpful for respondents in each denomination and what continuing education opportunities would respondents like to have?**

There is uniform agreement that personal relationships, conferences, and other participatory education opportunities are the most helpful educational resources in all denominations. James Barnett's book, *The Diaconate: Full and Equal Order*, was the only common book which was mentioned by at least a few respondents in most denominations (in fact, all but the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod). Since four of the five denominations regularly have members of their diaconate present at the Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean (DOTAC) conferences, it seems to make sense for an ecumenical resource center for the diaconate to sponsor similar gatherings.

In Table 1 respondents provided answers which corresponded with the tendency to more frequently cite personal relationships and conferences rather than book titles. In order of highest ratings to lowest ratings the categories which had the highest average response across all denominations were Spiritual Direction, Retreat Opportunities, and Continuing Education specific to expertise. It is also worth noting that an average of 40.9% of respondents in all denominations indicated that “networking with other members of the diaconate in other denominations” is desirable for their continuing education and personal growth.

The educational resources respondents indicated as most helpful for them in the past and their ratings of future desirable continuing education opportunities reveal activities which the proposed ecumenical resource center for the diaconate could provide. Such activities would raise minimal problems in terms of theological differences across denominations since many retreat models and spiritual direction practices are held in common across denominations. Continuing education in such activities as pastoral care or preaching could also be taught with a minimum of disagreement in denominational practice.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in the way they spend their time in ministry and the degree to which they value various ministerial tasks?**

As discussed in Chapter Three, the questions pertaining to “time spent” and “importance” of various ministerial activities can be divided into five categories or factor groups. The general shape of the Time spent / Importance graphs for each denomination is instructive. Both Lutheran denominations illustrate a positive slope from low ratings in liturgical functions to high ratings in pastoral care. Likewise, the Episcopalians and Roman Catholics have similar peaks at both ends of the graph, reflecting a high priority on both liturgical matters and pastoral care. The United

Methodists stand somewhat alone in their peak in the Education and Administration category, although this mirrors the “educational emphasis” ratings closely.

The most puzzling aspect of these graphs is in the relatively low emphasis placed on social action activities, especially in the “time spent” ratings. This factor group included the following categories in the actual survey: involvement in politics, social ministry with the impoverished, community organizing, and serving on board of area social service agencies.

The relatively low priority placed on “social action” or advocacy activities of deacons in these denominations is curious given the rather strong emphasis placed on these activities in denominational publications. Among Catholics, H. Richard McCord noted that documents from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops illustrated a greater emphasis on the deacon’s role in charity even though their place in the ministry of liturgy and word were not denied.

In their tending toward seeing the deacon as mainly a minister of charity, the United States bishops show both a familiarity with the history of this office and an attempt to read the contemporary signs of the times. They seem to be saying that the church today needs to emphasize in its ministry the works of charity and justice. Moreover, they could be interpreted as having an implicit concern that the duties of deacons and priests not become too interchangeable and confused.<sup>5</sup>

Similar tendencies to emphasize the deacon’s role in charity and justice work can also be seen in more recent documents including a pastoral statement by Joseph Cardinal Bernadin entitled “The Call to Service.” The emphasis on “service” in Cardinal Bernadin’s statement draws more attention to the deacon’s role in charity than in liturgy or word.<sup>6</sup> Similar emphases on ministering to the poor are also evident in other denominations. The 1996 United Methodist *Book of Discipline* connects the ministry of the deacon with the “Wesleyan passion for social holiness and ministry among the poor.”<sup>7</sup>

The 1996 Roman Catholic survey of the diaconate in the U.S. provides some additional detail to the social action activity of the Catholic diaconate. The 1996 survey revealed that over

one third of all deacons spend greater than fifty percent of their time in “Community/Peace/Justice” ministries. It is unclear what “community ministries” might entail, but the discrepancy between this survey project and the 1996 Roman Catholic survey suggests that “community” ministries might have been a very large category which might not be most appropriately linked to “Peace/Justice” ministries. Other questions of the Roman Catholic diaconate in 1996 reveal similar trends in the “social action” of deacons as this survey project. Only 15.5% of Roman Catholic deacons identified themselves as having a “very strong” or “strong” impact on “advocacy or social change groups.” 40% indicated they had “no impact to speak of” or “never tried to impact” advocacy or social change groups.

Given the strong emphasis denominations place on deacons’ ministry of charity and social action it is important to re-evaluate the extent to which deacons are actually involved in such ministry. This survey project is only one indicator which suggests that the emphasis on social action is not as great as the denominational documents might suggest. Still, there are many members of the diaconate in all denominations who are involved in ministry with the poor and disenfranchised who might not be revealed in the survey. For example, prison chaplains are primarily engaged in pastoral care rather than local government politics but their activity inevitably involves some advocacy for prisoners and criticism of the criminal justice system.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their assessment of what types of ministry they are most/least effective in?**

The rankings for their “most effective” ministry activity given by members of the diaconate in all five denominations correspond to what was found in the Time Spent/Importance factor groups. The fact that respondents identified Pastoral Care and Counseling activities most frequently suggests that such activities are perceived as more important than liturgical functions,

even though in the Time Spent/Importance analysis, Pastoral Care and Liturgical Functions received similar ratings in the Episcopal and Roman Catholic denominations. The United Methodist emphasis on education in the “most effective” rating category similarly reflects high marks in the Time Spent/Importance category.

The answers provided by respondents for the area of least effectiveness are more instructive. Again, there is some agreement in the Time Spent/Importance rankings and the frequency of mentioning Social action/Social justice concerns as areas of least effectiveness for all denominations. However, the Time Spent/Importance data did not reveal the overwhelming frequency of responses which stated that they feel least effective in the areas of social action and social justice. One possible explanation for the overwhelming feelings of least effectiveness in social action and social justice may be due to a perceived disparity between what denominational writings on diaconal identity suggest and respondents’ own examination of their ministerial priorities. As discussed earlier, H. Richard McCord found that the “normative expectations” for the Roman Catholic diaconate tended to emphasize the deacon’s role in charity more than many persons (including deacons) in the Baltimore archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church. It seems plausible in a vocation which strives to interrelate church and world that there would be considerable tension in one direction or the other. The results of this survey suggest that members of the diaconate are being pulled toward more church-related ministries but feel some unease about this emphasis in their lives of ministry. Continuing education efforts which emphasize competency in social action/social justice ministry activities should be encouraged in all of the denominations. The temptation to utilize the diaconate as a mini-presbyterate should also be discouraged.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their feelings of “job satisfaction?”**

For this research question this study examined the feelings toward authority for ministry as well as feelings of qualification for one’s vocation and a direct question about “job satisfaction.” Overall, there are surprisingly few differences among denominations in their job satisfaction ratings. Generally, members of the diaconate feel positive about their work. All the respondents gave somewhat lower rankings for feeling that they had enough authority to accomplish their ministry. A lack of authority is felt by approximately one-fourth of respondents in all but the Episcopal Church. The final answer in the survey which attempted to measure members of the diaconate concerns about the future sheds some light on this research question as well. Respondents in all denominations expressed concern over other clergy’s lack of understanding or outright opposition to the diaconate. Where this is the case it seems plausible to expect that respondents would feel that they lack authority.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their feelings of being appreciated by other persons' (ordained and lay) in their denomination?**

The findings in figures 23-27 illustrate general agreement among members of the diaconate in all denominations in their feeling appreciated by other persons in their denomination. The ratings for bishops, area supervisors, and denominational offices are generally lower than the other categories, although even for these categories respondents agreed that they feel appreciated (although perhaps not personally known).

Given the close ties in early church history between bishops and deacons it is disappointing that the ratings given to bishops are not higher. The Episcopal deacons were most

likely to feel personally appreciated by their bishop. This corresponds with the Episcopal deacons' frequent mention of bishops as their reason for hope or concern with regard to the future of the diaconate. The Lutheran denomination ratings contrast with the Episcopal ratings. Approximately 30% of the diaconate in The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America felt they received little or no appreciation from their bishops. Creative ways of improving the relationship between bishops and members of the Lutheran diaconate should be explored, even though the overall ratings for appreciation are still generally good for these denominations.

The highest marks for feeling personally appreciated are found between Roman Catholic deacons and Roman Catholic priests. The high rating for other presbyters is understandable given the continued priest shortage in recent years and the perception that Roman Catholic deacons can “lighten the load” of parish responsibilities for the priest. It will be interesting to learn how these partnerships between deacon and priest are maintained and how they also might contribute to the perception of deacons as “mini-priests” rather than as an order with a distinctive vocation.

There were also high marks for the relationship among members of the diaconate themselves in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. These high rankings among deaconesses are a testimony to the continued emphasis on community life which Lutheran deaconesses have held to for over a hundred years. It is worth exploring the extent to which this close community might lessen their need to feel appreciated by denominational officials. The close diaconal community could also, however, inadvertently move them to the margins of denominational life, which may not be desirable for a group that appears to be declining in numbers. The greater than

ten percent of Lutheran respondents who feel “no appreciation” from either their bishops or area supervisors is reason for some concern as well.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their assessment of other persons’(ordained and lay) vision for the diaconate?**

The rankings that members of the diaconate gave to other persons in their denominations with respect to having a vision for the diaconate were uniformly lower than the ranking given for feelings of appreciation. This ought not come as a surprise since a vision for the diaconate requires a considerable amount of education on what the diaconate has been in the past and could be in the future. The generally low scores even among members of the diaconate themselves for having a “clear vision” suggests that all denominations have far to go in nurturing a vision for what the diaconate could be in the future.

The Lutheran denominations reported the greatest percentage of respondents who believe their diaconal colleagues have a clear vision. Respondents from both Lutheran denominations were also most likely to perceive their bishops and other area supervisors as not having a clear vision of the diaconate. The “vision distance” between the diaconate in Lutheran denominations and other denominational personnel suggests there is a great diversity of visions and/or disagreement among these groups in understanding the diaconate. There is also likely poor educational processes within the denominations to lessen the disparity between members of the diaconate and others in the church.

There are also strikingly low scores given to presbyters in both the United Methodist and Episcopal churches. Deacons in these churches perceive most presbyters as having less than a clear vision of the diaconate, with United Methodist presbyters described as having “some confusion” by seventy percent of respondents in this denomination. Although a concern in some

respects, such confusion is to be expected given that United Methodism is in the first five years of a renewed diaconate.

Respondents in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches are the only ones who perceive more than half of laypersons as having at least a general understanding of the diaconate. This is certainly better than what is found in United Methodism, but it is still less than ideal. Members of the diaconate should explore ways of making their vocation better understood for all laity in the church. Denominational offices and the episcopacy have a significant role to play in providing theological leadership in constructing a vision for the diaconate which is based on its history and directed toward the diaconate's future role in the future church.

**What are the differences and similarities among respondents in their degree of hopefulness regarding the diaconate?**

There was considerable difference among the denominations in respondents' hopefulness about the diaconate. Roman Catholics were most hopeful, followed by Episcopal deacons, United Methodist deacons, and the Lutheran diaconates. The differences in hopefulness, however, were not as interesting as the reasons given for being either hopeful or having concerns. For example, among Roman Catholic deacons the priest shortage seems to be driving both hope for their continued need in the church but also concern over their distinctive role to play in the church. Episcopal deacons tended to place a great deal of emphasis on their bishops for either their hope or concern, whereas Lutherans were again trusting in their strong sense of community as their reason for hope. United Methodists most often commented on the newness of their denomination's understanding of the diaconate.

All members of the diaconate in all denominations studied here would likely agree that there are many reasons for hope as well as concern in the future of the diaconate. A proposed

ecumenical resource center could help provide a space to reflect more deeply on these matters and strategically plan for ways the diaconate can meet the needs of the church as it seeks to bear witness to the kingdom of God in the world.

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Deacons' wives play a prominent role in the Roman Catholic diaconate. Deacons' wives regularly attend conferences with their husbands and are encouraged to participate in the educational process for deacons as well.

<sup>2</sup>Diakonia World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities, *Diakonia: Challenge and Response*, (Utrecht, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Dana Robert documents this tendency in *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>Austin Flannery, (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, (Northport, New York: Costello, 1992), p. 718.

<sup>5</sup>H. Richard McCord, 1985, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, *The Call to Service: Pastoral Statement on the Permanent Diaconate*, (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1996*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House), p. 187.