

The Permanent Diaconate:
A Challenge to the United Methodist Church

An address given to the United Methodist deaconesses and home missionaries

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to invite the attention of United Methodists generally -- but pastors, DS's and bishops especially to a long-standing anomaly in the theories and structures of our general and ordained ministries which is no longer feasible, or even tolerable, in the church we are trying to become: a church more truly effective in Christian witness and service. In its simplest terms, this anomaly may be defined by three obvious facts:

1. that many persons ordained to the ministry "of Word, Sacrament and Order" (i.e. the local church and its support-systems) are in fact appointed to many quite different tasks and roles (i.e. "special appointments");

2. that many "lay persons" with special professional qualifications for significant social and community service-roles are eager to exercise their "gifts and graces" in Christ's Name and the church's "ordination" (authorization and support);

3. that the office and work of deaconesses remain as scarcely more than a vestige of a once great diaconal tradition (not to mention its perpetuation of an archaic "sexism") -- its vital work of serving ministries largely unrelated and unrecognized by either local churches or Annual Conferences.

The facts -- undeniable but largely ignored -- call more urgently than ever before for a radical reconsideration of the basic order of the diaconal ministries of the United Methodist Church by all those concerned with valid and effective church order and ordination and most especially be the Commission to Study the Ministry (Bishop W. R. Cannon, chairman). This reconsideration must be carried forward on a very broad scale of study and dialogue, in the light of traditions that are more relevant today than ever before and in the face of exciting new challenges and opportunities.

I.

TOWARD A MORE FLEXIBLE AND FRUITFUL MINISTRY

THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

Everyone agrees that there is an urgent need for revitalization in the ministry, and in our understanding of ministry, in the United Methodist Church (along with all the other churches in Christendom). The evidence for this is everywhere and overwhelming: in the tensions and confusions between “clergy” and “laity” as to their common and distinctive roles; in the vagueness of most explanations of the necessity for an "ordained ministry"; in the lack of appropriate provisions for authentic "serving ministries" (diakonia) other than by “special appointment”; in the inconsistencies of principles (and practice) in the differentiation between "regular" and "special" appointments, (with and without "annuity!"); in the relegation of deaconesses, “ministers” of education, music (etc.), business managers (etc.) to peripheral status; and in the provisional character of the ordination of deacons as nothing more than a way-station between the license to preach and elder's orders (and conference membership). The result contradicts our United Methodist traditions at a basic level: it isn't working well because it is failing to utilize at their best all of our people who really want to serve. As of now, we have been slow to risk the disruptions of basic change in our conventional forms of the ordained ministry and the patterns of Annual Conference membership. And yet, the time for just such risks has fully come.

There is an abundant literature, and a general consensus, about the fundamental importance of the "general ministry," the ministry of the laity, of all baptized/confirmed Christians. Perhaps this consensus is more theoretical than practical and lacking in necessary dynamics and direction. Everyone who bears the Name of Christ is commissioned thereby to a general ministry of "witness and service in the world." The laity is the Church visible in the world, and more and more they are coming to understand themselves in this light.

But what then measures off the difference between dedicated competent lay persons for those ordained to the "ministry of Word, Sacrament and Order" (in the language of our current

Discipline paragraphs 302 and 309)? And what, most especially, justifies the order and office of deacon in the passage from "lay witness" to elder's orders and full conference membership? In practice, the average "deacon" is not more truly "diaconal" in the strict sense of that term than many active lay-persons -- and sometimes not less so than elders and "members in full connection." Moreover, the growth -- and diversification -- of the "special appointments" of elders to roles that are specifically diaconal (in form and spirit) reminds us of the inconsistencies (and often inequities!) into which we have drifted.

We use the office of deacon as a steppingstone to the elderate (tacked on to the real provisions for "probationary membership" in the Conference). We use the office of deaconess as something in-between lay-service and ordination, largely unrecognized by the parish life, on the one side, or the clergy "in full connection" on the other. We use other persons in full-time serving ministries (Christian education, church music, church administration., etc.) without providing the possibility of fully responsible relations to their congregations or their Conferences. Additionally there are many other people (young and old, male and female) who are willing and eager for a part in the serving ministries of the church that we are not putting to good use, because our structures are not flexible enough and our imaginations less than adequate. We seem to be stuck with a tradition that may have had good reason to evolve as it did but which is no longer self-validating. We seem to have forgotten another tradition -- the permanent diaconate -- that may hold greater promise for revitalization in ministry than most of the other viable options open before us.

II.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is a commonplace that the root-meaning of "deacon," "deaconess," "diaconate" is service (diakonia) and that, after the "apostles," deacons" were the first order of "ministers" to emerge in the early church. What is not so generally understood is that the diaconal office continued as a separate and distinctive office in the evolving church, even as the offices of

"presbyter" (pastor/priest) and "episcopo" (bishop) came to dominate the liturgical and sacramental life of the churches. The sum of an obscure and complex history would seem to be (with many arguable variations) that in the early church, East and West (and in the East today) the office of deacon was something more and something very different from what it thereafter came to be in the Latin West (whence our tradition on point). For example, in The Roman Pontifical (4th century, or earlier) deacons are ordained to preach, to baptize and to assist in Communion "subject to the bishop or the priest" as well as to exercise their special serving ministries. "They also had important administrative functions especially with regard to church property and church philanthropy and thus they often served as auxiliaries to the bishops" (Bouyer, Dictionary of Theology, p. 113). Deaconesses served in roles somewhat analogous to those of the deacons. Until recently, "cardinal deacons" in Rome were not obliged to be ordained priests -- and there are cases on record where deacons were directly elevated to the episcopacy (cf. Bouyer, idem.).

Very largely in the Latin West -- and later in the Church of England -- the diaconate became an appendage to the priesthood, and the office of "deaconess" was assimilated into the orders and functions of "religious women" (nuns and sisters). There is a long and significant history of both deacons and deaconesses in Europe in the Reformation Period which has never been adequately understood in our country. In the Eastern church the diaconate is still a stable office, defined and exercised as different from, although coordinated with, the presbyterate. And since Vatican II, Rome is trying to recover and redefine its own ancient office of "permanent deacon," while in parallel attempts, many Protestant Churches are moving in similar developments.

III.

TOWARD A "PERMANENT DIACONATE" IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

There are extensive and important new studies of the diaconate in historical perspective that go far beyond this admittedly brief sketch (as in Faith and Order's series of study pamphlets on the diaconate, the debates on the permanent diaconate in Vatican II and the exciting reports of new programs for their new "permanent deacons," a proposal to the Lutheran Church in America, a study of the Presbyterian Church in Canada). Our concern here, however, is that there are no serious hindrances -- neither in the biblical testimony nor in the earliest and latest traditions of the ecumenical church -- to the serious and hopeful reconsideration of the literally new frontiers before us for new patterns for the "serving and caring ministries" (diakonia) that the United Methodist Church might be able to provide its own people, and the world!

Have we not come to the point in time when a separate and distinctive diaconate would go far toward meeting an urgent, felt need and would generate a significant and exciting response? Is there not a real "gap" -- in our thinking and in fact -- between the general ministry of the laos and the specialized ministries of the cleros, a gap that might best be filled by a properly conceived diakonos? Is it not a possibility that if the permanent diaconate were a sufficient meaningful order many of those in service ministries under "special appointments" would prefer this order to their present anomalous relationships? And, most of all, are there not many others (medical doctors, teachers, social service workers, etc., etc.) who would eagerly qualify and enlist in a properly conceived diaconate? The evidence that this is so continues to mount, over the country and throughout the church. And would this not really "solve" the

problem of the status and dignity of "deaconesses" -- a problem that has been largely left in limbo for various reasons (most of them unconvincing)?

Any such "reform" must obviously be conceived as a part of a truly comprehensive reconceiving of the entire problem of "the ministry" as a whole -- and of the functional "definitions" of "ministry" in the local congregation and its mission in the world.

We must begin and end with the laos -- the whole body of baptized and confirmed Christians, called by their profession of faith in Christ into manifold ministries of worship, nurture, witness and service. There are the basic ministries in the church and in the world, but they require instruction, inspiration and enablement from "representative" ministries and ministers in different and yet also coordinated "offices." The People of God must be led in their common life in the Body of Christ by representative persons (called inwardly by the Holy Spirit; called outwardly and thus authorized by the church herself) in and through the ministries of "Word, Sacrament and Order," all of the various expressions of faith and empowerment that identify the church and make her people vital, valid witnesses of Christ and servants of God's human family. There is, clearly, no call for diminishing in the slightest our utter concern for the sacramental ministries of preaching, and liturgy and the corporate life and work of the "gathered church." There was never a time when the pastoral ministry, aimed at the enablement of the laos to be the church truly visible in the world, was more urgent, more crucial, more rewarding.

But, by the very same token, there are other specialized ministries -- of serving, teaching, reconciling in the Name of Christ -- that need to be encouraged, guided and, above all, to be "ordained" by the church, not in competition with the pastoral ministries of the elderate but as their genuine complement. The deacon need no longer be an elder in the making; elders need no longer be divided (arbitrarily) into "regular" and "special" appointees. The Pastoral ministry is,

or ought to be, focused in and through the gathered church as it experiences its own identity and dedicates itself to mission. The diaconal ministry is, or ought to be, focused in or toward the world as a bodying forth of the churches' practical and secular commitments (within her own institutional life and in her outreach in the world).

Such diaconal ministries are no more elective in the Christian Church than the pastoral ministries but they are not the same and do not call for the "special appointments" of elders to get themselves done -- especially when there are so many avenues of services not now being filled and so many persons professionally qualified for them who do not need "elders' orders."

One obvious possibility, therefore, is a newly conceived "permanent diaconate" in the United Methodist Church. Nobody now knows exactly what this should mean and there is no simple, clear blueprint that could be translated into appropriate legislation for the next General Conference. But, once the idea is grasped, once the inertia of our accustomed distinctions is consciously redirected, once the possibilities of the experiment are even partially envisaged, there is no good reason why new forms and patterns may not be developed -- by men and women who combine both the pragmatic sense of the feasible and the ideal vision of the possible (a mix for which United Methodists have splendid precedents!). Here, for openers, are some comments in that direction.

A permanent diaconate should be coordinate with the equal to the pastoral ministry, in equivalent professional competence and appropriate ecclesiastical status. It must not be conceived of as merely auxiliary to the "elder" or "presbyter." It should, as a matter of course, include those educational and healing ministries customarily discharged by "deaconesses." But the office has broader frontiers and possibilities as well. It might, very well include ministries of music, church administration, social work, scholarship and teaching (including seminary

teaching), medical missions, specialized forms of legal practice in service of the church, etc., etc. The whole vision need not be filled out in advance; what is needed is the vision in its essence!

The permanent diaconate must begin with people professionally trained for their service specialty and accredited by the appropriate agencies in their several fields. But it ought never to be conceived chiefly in terms of the private service of this or that individual. The deacon should understand himself/herself, like the elder, as an enabler as well as agent and, again like the elder, representative of the church as a whole and therefore accountable to the church for the representation.

Diaconal ministries should also be conceived as supporting, and being supported by, the pastors and their congregations. Responsibility and accountability suggest that membership in Annual Conferences ought to be open, equally, to deacons and elders on an equal and coordinate basis -- with basic rights and differentiated roles, just as now this is the case with the lay members of a Conference. Indeed, an Annual Conference composed of laity, deacons and elders in stable balance (where no group could easily victimize another) would open up exciting possibility for coordinated planning, feedback from the churches and the world, increased flexibility and participation in almost every aspect of the church's life and work.

IV

THE POSSIBLE STRATEGIES AND PERSISTENT QUESTIONS

The first and foremost requirement is that those interested in a permanent diaconate attempt to spread the concept as it is noted theologically, biblically and practically throughout all the church. It should be emphasized that we are dealing neither with a new and untried nor a "fad" concept, but one that has long precedent in scripture and in the tradition of the church: one which is now uniquely suited to our times. Such a widespread understanding can be had by continual circulation of study papers, conversations, and any other such means of communication

by which we are in touch with other members of the body. Particularly would this be true within seminaries and other academic communities, Annual Conference, study groups, discussions, retreats, etc.

Before it is possible to seek action in the General Conference several other steps should be taken.

1. Enlistment of other allies in the study and support of a permanent diaconate. Natural prospects would be members of the Christian Education Fellowship (CEF), Fellowship of United Methodist Musicians (FUMM), National Association of Health and Welfare Workers, United Methodist Association of Church Administrators and United Methodist Press Association.

2. In addition, it would be wise to have wide exposure in major publications, of study proposal on permanent diaconate. Such exposure may find a place in *CHRISTIAN MINISTRY*, *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, *CHRISTIAN ADVOCATE* or *THE INTERPRETER* or we might be bold enough to seek one of the courses in the church-wide Mission Study.

3. Groups interested in action on formation of a permanent diaconate should be prepared to respond to the invitation of the Commission to Study The Ministry in ways that are both positive and constructive. In order to do that, we must consider some practical details as yet unresolved.

Considerations of practical questions unresolved . . .

1. What are accrediting agencies and by what standards do they evaluate competence, acceptability? Any other professional qualifications?

2. Would the concept of Conference relationships for a permanent diaconate involve any ecclesiastical questions other than the normal reticence of those defending "status quo?"

3. This paper indicates that the terminology of -- "ordination" -- directs itself to the accountability, authorization and support of the church. We must have agreement concerning the

means and the authority by which serving ministries are set apart (consecration, commissioning, other words have also been used).

4. What is the relationship to the worker/priest concept; for example, persons who remain in secular employment but continue to serve and function in diaconal ministry?

5. Are there any problems relating to the pension, hospitalization or other fringe benefits normally accorded the elder by the Annual Conference?

6. What relationship might a permanent deacon have to the Annual Conference in relation to the availability for appointment and guarantee of employment such as are now offered to the elder?

7. In what manner would a permanent diaconate be related in a local parish in what manner to the Annual Conference.

CONCLUSION

The renewal of the church involves the renewal and revitalization of all the ministries of the church -- the customary ones and the new ones that desperately need devising. This must begin with the basic premise that the ordained ministry exists to enable the general ministry (not the other way around). The warrant for specialized ministries, in every case, is to enable the whole people of God to fulfill their mission from Christ to the world. They must be enabled at once, and equally, in their common life in the Body of Christ (worship, sacrament, Christian experience) and in the common discipleship in the world (witness and service). From such enablements would come not only new levels of Christian experience and action, but new feelings of Christian self-confidence and Christian hope. When, in her recent past at least, has such a "fullness of time" been "at hand": When a new form of ministry might actually serve the church and the world so aptly, so validly, so effectively?