

*Deacons as Emissary-Servants: A Liturgical Theology*

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At a recent Annual Conference gathering, I had the opportunity to join in a beautiful memorial service for those persons in our Conference who had died this past year. It was a meaningful service for me as it celebrated the "great cloud of witnesses" who have gone before us. We ended the service with the celebration of Holy Communion and the song "Soon and Very Soon," which expresses the blessed hope that is ours as God's beloved people. It wasn't until after the service was over that I realized that something important was missing. No deacons assisted the elders at the table of the Lord's Supper. For most persons in the service, their absence went completely unnoticed, in spite of the fact that deacons are ordained to "lead in worship, [and] to assist elders at Holy Baptism and Holy Communion."<sup>1</sup>

The absence of deacons at the table that day is a powerful symbol of the problems in our understanding of the new Order of Deacon in United Methodism. Our theological understanding of deacons is in its infancy. United Methodist deacons, elders, and laypersons do not yet understand the theology implicit in the deacon's important role as assistants in the sacraments and as clergy ordained to lead through Word and Service in the world and the church. There are many questions that need to be explored. What is the theological basis for the Order of Deacon? How is the theology of the diaconate expressed in their actions in Christian worship? How might the Order of Deacon strengthen - rather than overshadow - the ministry of all the baptized? How do deacons "lead the Church in relating the gathered life of Christians to their ministries in the world, interrelating worship in the gathered community with service to God in the world?"<sup>2</sup>

Deacons' many different ministries of service - both inside the local church and in the world - make it difficult to give simple answers to these questions and to describe a unified theology of the Order of Deacon. A theology of deacons must therefore also draw on deacons' common activities as ordained persons in services of worship in order to offer a unified "practical theology" of the deacon's vocation.<sup>3</sup> Deacons' ministries of service in the world must be interrelated with their functions in Christian worship. It is in Christian worship that the congregation can most vividly observe the deacon's vocational identity and see how it is distinct from that of laypersons and elders.

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<sup>1</sup> A selection from the "Examination of Deacons" in the *Services for the Ordering of Ministry in the United Methodist Church: 1999 Provisional Texts*, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1996* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House), p. 186.

This article provides a modest start toward a more complete theology of the diaconate that will hopefully emerge in the years ahead. I offer a theology of the diaconate based on recent biblical research on the meaning of *diakonia* (and related terms) and interweave this with an analysis of deacons' practices in Christian worship. I begin this essay by arguing that a deacon's "emissary-servant identity" is a central component to an emerging theology of deacons. As an "emissary-servant" the deacon is called to proclaim the "now and the not yet" of God's reign. The second part of this paper explains how this emissary-servant identity is fleshed out and strengthened by the deacon's liturgical role in Christian worship. I give special attention to a theological analysis of the deacon's role in the liturgies for Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Weddings, and Funerals.

In these early years of the Order's formation in United Methodism, it is tempting to settle for quick answers in order to reduce the level of ambiguity and/or outright confusion people feel toward the new Order of Deacon. I invite the reader to the more difficult task of carefully reflecting on the diaconate from biblical and theological grounds and integrating this with an analysis of liturgical practices which have historically been performed by deacons. The function of the deacon *vis a vis* laypersons and elders will be addressed as a matter of course rather than as a starting point for this essay.<sup>4</sup> A theology of deacons that begins with a defensive posture or by focusing on the least common denominator of what the deacon can or cannot do is an unhelpful way to proceed if one's goal is to understand the Order of Deacon in all of its creative potential. This is especially crucial in these early years of the Order of Deacon's formation in United Methodism.

Theologies of the diaconate, *per se*, are just beginning to emerge among denominations that have restored the Order of Deacon.<sup>5</sup> Even though the Roman Catholic Church has had a

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<sup>3</sup> Practical theology, understood in a somewhat technical sense here, involves a kind of correlation or dialogue between theory and practice. Browning, Don S., *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Van Buren and I have previously outlined the relationship of deacons with elders and laypersons in our recent book that offers an overview of the United Methodist diaconate. *The Deacon: Ministry through Words of Faith and Acts of Love* is available through Cokesbury. This article takes a reflective step back in thinking specifically about a theology of the diaconate.

<sup>5</sup> The first modern attempts to explicitly develop a "theology of the diaconate" were by Karl Rahner regarding the decision by Vatican II to restore the permanent diaconate. "The Theology of the Restoration of the Diaconate," in *Theological Investigations, Vol. 5*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), p. 268-314. Rahner, Karl, "On the Diaconate," in *Theological Investigations, Vol. XII, Confrontations 2*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), p. 61-80. Roman Catholic deacon, William T. Ditewig has written the most recent outline of a theology of the diaconate based on a draft of the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United*

"permanent diaconate" since 1967 (similar to what United Methodists developed in 1996), the Vatican acknowledges that the "points of reference" for a theology of the diaconate "need to be developed and deepened."<sup>6</sup> Most studies, though noteworthy, have tended to be either broad surveys of the diaconate in the history of the church or careful biblical exegesis of pertinent terms related to the diaconate.<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the Section of Deacons and Diaconal Ministry's publication, *The Deacon: Ministry through Words of Faith and Acts of Love*, and the articles in this volume, there have been few works dealing explicitly with the United Methodist understandings of the diaconate published after the 1996 General Conference legislation.

The renewal of the diaconate in various denominations presents a valuable "ecumenical opportunity." In my own research on the diaconate I have benefited a great deal from conversations I have had with deacons from traditions outside of United Methodism. I pray that the theology offered here provides some measure of encouragement to persons in all denominations which are experiencing a renewal of the diaconate.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Deacon's Emissary-Servant Identity**

*Diakonia* and related words are used over seventy-five times in the New Testament. The *diakon-* words in the New Testament have prompted considerable discussion in the last decade. *Diakonia* is usually rendered as "service" or "ministry" in contemporary translations (Romans 11:13, 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:5). The related words, *diakonos* and *diakonon*, meaning the person doing *diakonia*, is usually translated "servant," "deacon," or "minister." There is an emerging consensus, however, that the traditional - or perhaps more accurately, modern - translation of

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*States*. This directory is scheduled for release in the coming year. Ditewig, William T., "A Theology of the Diaconate," in *Deacon Digest*, March/April, 1999, p. 17-21. Other articles which explicitly construct a theology of the diaconate have tended to come from the Anglican tradition. Hannaford, Robert, "Towards a Theology of the Diaconate," in Christine Hall (ed.) *The Deacon's Ministry*, (Herefordshire, United Kingdom: Gracewing, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons: Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, a broad understanding of the diaconate is a necessary first-step in any area of research. Barnett, James M. *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order: A Comprehensive and Critical Study of the Origin, Development, and Decline of the Diaconate in the Context of the Church's Total Ministry and the Renewal for the Diaconate Today with Reflections for the Twenty-first Century*. (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995); Plater, Ormonde. *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991); McCord, J.I. and Parker, H.L. (eds) *Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, (London: Epworth Press, 1966). The biblical studies on the diaconate have, for the most part, been responses to John Collins' very thorough study of the *diakon-* words in the New Testament and extra-biblical literature. *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, Published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, 1996,

*diakon-* words as "everyday acts of service" is insufficient.<sup>9</sup> The idea of "service" is certainly communicated in these Greek terms, but the emphasis may be closer to a notion of service within the context of an "emissary" or "spokesperson" identity.

The term "emissary" is gaining recognition as a complementary interpretation for the traditional "servant" designation for *diakonos* and related terms.<sup>10</sup> Paul's use of *diakonos* to refer to himself (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4, 11:23;) is one of the more obvious pieces of evidence for a more nuanced understanding of the term. In these passages, Paul emphasizes his authority as God's emissary or *diakonos*. This does not negate the translation of *diakonos* as servant as much as it helps to give a more complete understanding of the terms as they are used in the bible.

This brief word-study of *diakon-* words suggests a closer look at what I call an "emissary-servant theology" of deacons to complement the more traditional "servant theology" of deacons. As an emissary-servant from God the deacon "points" to the source and authority for his or her servant ministry. John Collins states that in ancient times emissaries (*diakonoi*) were often sent by a king or other high-ranking individuals to transact business on the ruler's behalf.

### *Deacons and Eschatological Hope*

The apostle Paul had a similar understanding of his own ministry as a *diakonos* of God. Where a *diakonos* engaged in transactions on behalf of another person, the *diakonos* served as a guarantor or representative of **future** action by the ruler. This occasional function of an emissary in ancient times and the uses of *diakon-* terms in 1 Peter 1:12 and Hebrews 1:14 gave deacons in the early church an eschatological focus for their ministry.

While eschatology is often understood as the study of the "end times," a broader notion of eschatology is more fitting for our purposes. Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *Theology of Hope*, focuses on eschatology as the human response (hope) that is expressed by Christians who are living between the "now" and the "not yet."

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<sup>9</sup> Conzelman offers this translation in his *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. by James W. Leitch. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 208. John Collins argues that the more modern and limited translation of *diakon-* as "service" is the result of 19<sup>th</sup> century deaconess movements in Germany and the subsequent definition of *diakonia* by H.W. Beyer in *Kittel's Theological Dictionary*.

<sup>10</sup> The proceedings from the 1992 symposium by the North American Association for the Diaconate document this growing recognition. Craighill, P., *Diaconal Ministry, Past, Present, & Future*, (Providence, RI: NAAD, 1992).

[E]schatology means the doctrine of the Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, eschatology is "the key" in which this theology of deacons is set. The eschatological dimension of a theology of deacons can be seen in many of the activities deacons carry out in their lives of ministry and in their activities during the worship service. A deacon's ministry of compassion and social justice is oriented toward the coming reign of God. The deacon through his or her ministry of compassion and justice among the poor works to make this "kingdom value" a reality in the world and also highlights the reality of God's reign in the worship service. This is the reason for a deacon's service in the world and the reason for a deacon's representative role in worship.

The early church's interpretation of Hebrews 1:14 illustrates the eschatological role for deacons: "Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, (*diakonian*) sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" The emissary in Hebrews 1:14 has been sent to serve and announce a future reality. The emissary serves those who "**are to** inherit salvation." The early church Fathers used the symbolism of angels around the communion table to refer to the deacon.<sup>12</sup> Some months ago while visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cloisters in Manhattan, I was surprised to find a fragment of a medieval bishop's crosier that also depicted "angels dressed as deacons" on one part of the staff. The portrayal of angels as deacons points to the eschatological and emissarial meaning of a deacon's ministry.

The early church understood a deacon's emissary-servant identity in two general ways. They were emissaries of God (as portrayed in the angel imagery) and they were emissaries of the bishop. As the bishops' assistants, deacons were often placed in charge of coordinating ministries (particularly for the poor) among the local churches where the bishop had oversight. The historic bond between bishops and deacons is observable today in the United Methodist service of ordination where only the bishop lays hands on the deacon candidates. In contrast, the service

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<sup>11</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 16.

ordaining elder candidates includes the laying on of hands by the bishop and the other elders. Much work remains to be done to explore how this historic link between bishops and deacons might be carried out in the United Methodist Church today.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Deacon's Representative Ministry*

An emissary serves as a "go between" to bring the concerns of the people to the attention of another party. Deacons have historically demonstrated their emissary-servant identity most obviously through their leadership of intercessory prayers in worship. A deacon's activity in the intercessory prayer and in many other aspects of worship services represents and brings into focus the ministry of all the baptized and the congregation's celebrations and concerns. The terms "represents" and "focus" are used frequently in this article and in other descriptions of the diaconate by authors from other denominations.<sup>14</sup> These terms highlight the fact that a deacon's identity ought not be reduced to a purely functionalist perspective. As will be seen later, an analysis of the theology that is implicit in these functions illustrates the fullness of a deacon's vocation.

A deacon's vocation is important to the church for reasons which extend beyond a simple list of their weekly tasks. A deacon's liturgical functions have a representative and focusing power which makes clearer the meaning of all Christians' ministries in the world. Nearly all of the functions (visiting the sick, preaching, teaching, etc) performed by an ordained elder or deacon may also be done by a layperson. Through solemn ordination a deacon is given authority to bring into focus all Christian ministry through their ministries of preaching, teaching, and service. When an ordained person performs a liturgical function they do not do so in order to highlight exclusive privileges; they are called to serve rather than to be served. Instead, their

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<sup>12</sup> Brockman, Norbert, *Ordained to Service: A Theology of the Permanent Diaconate*, (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1976), p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Other denominations are realizing that the deacon's special relationship to the bishop is a helpful distinction to maintain so as to clarify roles between presbyters (elders) and deacons. John Ziegler, a Roman Catholic author, states: "Once again, the experience of the early Church might offer several suggestions. Much of the present-day confusion regarding the diaconate, which arises from its long history of having been a transitional office, might be eliminated if, in the actual exercise of diaconal ministry, the deacon is more immediately responsible to the bishop." Zeigler, John, "Toward a Theology of the Diaconate: Biblical and Early Historical Antecedents," in *Diaconal Reader: Selected Articles from the Diaconal Quarterly* compiled by the Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1985), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Hannaford "Towards a Theology of the Diaconate," in Christine Hall (ed.) *The Deacon's Ministry*, (Herefordshire, United Kingdom: Gracewing, 1992). The World Council of Churches document, *Baptism*,

representative ministry is intended to focus attention on God and to represent the ministries of all Christians. Rather than detract from the ministry of all the baptized, the ministry of the ordained - understood in this way - brings attention to all Christian ministry.

The metaphor of icons helps to clarify the representative ministry of deacons. The purpose of an icon is not the picture itself; it is a vessel to focus one's attention on God. Similarly, any representative (ordained) ministry is important not only for what an ordained person does, but also for the way ordained persons help focus everyone's ultimate concern on God. John Dally, an Episcopal priest, states this succinctly in reference to the ordained persons' roles in Holy Communion:

A deacon is the icon of the Christ who gets up from the table and gives his status away by assuming the role of a servant, just as the [elder] is an icon of the Christ who understands flesh and blood and life itself as a gift made perfect by being offered up in gratitude.<sup>15</sup>

The metaphor of icons also reveals how deacons may re-present or "make present" the reign of God. Icons in an Eastern Orthodox Church remind the worshipper that God's reign in the world is not yet complete but that its beauty may be grasped in part through the act of worship. So also do deacons in their ministries of service help "make present" the beauty of the reign of God in the world around us. The "not yet" dimension of the reign of God is, of course, still present in all ministry. But as the deacon witnesses to the coming reign of God, the deacon also proclaims that the kingdom is, in part, already here. It is precisely in living out of this tension of "already - not yet" as an emissary-servant that the deacon keeps before God's people the priorities of God's reign.

## **The Deacon's Emissary-Servant Functions in Christian Worship**

### *Baptism*

Deacons' representative role is clearly evident in the fact that deacons' (as well as the elders') call to ministry does not stem primarily from their ordination but from their baptism. The most succinct description of the deacon's ministry in the *Book of Discipline* begins with the following words: "From among the baptized, deacons are called by God to a lifetime of servant

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*Eucharist, and Ministry* and the Hanover Report, *The Diaconate as an Ecumenical Opportunity*, also use these terms in their statements regarding the diaconate.

<sup>15</sup> Dalley, John A, "A Recent Sermon," in *Diakoneo*, vol., 20, no. 1, Easter, 1998, p. 2-3.

leadership...<sup>16</sup> Deacons are to lead and encourage the baptized in their ministries of service. Baptism calls all persons to a life of service. Deacons re-present this calling as a reminder to all baptized believers.

In the congregation's reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, the whole congregation is invited to "remember your baptism and be thankful." The deacon, as a representative of the common call to interrelate worship and service, is an appropriate person to lead this portion of the liturgy with the entire community. The deacon's encouragement to remember your baptism and be thankful is not only the recall of the past event of baptism. It is also a reminder of the present and future privilege of service to "faithfully participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."<sup>17</sup> Baptism both proclaims a present reality but also looks forward to a time when in Christ, there is "no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28).<sup>18</sup>

### *Holy Communion*

In the early church, the responsibility of extending the love of Christ to the poor in the church largely revolved around the deacon's action during the celebration of the Eucharist and the Agape meal. From the second to the fourth centuries of early Christianity deacons were responsible both for accepting the gifts brought by the people at the liturgy and for distributing those offerings of food and clothes to the poor. The Agape meal was a time of fellowship for all Christians after the celebration of the Eucharist and it was a time when the poor were fed. The liturgical act of Holy Communion and the early church's practice of charity were seen as a unified whole with the deacon playing an important integrating function. As the church grew, the character of charity transformed. Christian charity became depersonalized. Instead of giving gifts to poorer neighbors whom they knew, they likely gave to a more abstract "poor relief fund."<sup>19</sup> Early Methodism practiced a kind of Agape meal as well. The Methodist "love feasts" as they were called provided opportunities for fellowship among various classes in a circuit and helped to provide assistance to those persons in the fellowship most in need.

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<sup>16</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Crowley, Joann, "Baptism as Eschatological Event," *Worship*, vol. 62, July 1988, p. 290-298.

The connection between the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the coming of God's reign of justice was common in the early church's interpretation of the meal narratives in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 11:26 is perhaps the most striking example: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death **until he comes.**"<sup>20</sup> A hymn by Wesley also illustrates the eschatological theme relating the heavenly banquet with the Eucharistic celebration.

O that all men would haste  
To the spiritual feast,  
At Jesus's word  
Do this, and be fed with the love of our Lord!

Bring near the glad day  
When all shall obey  
Thy dying request,  
And eat of Thy supper, and lean on Thy breast.

Then, then let us see  
Thy glory, and be  
Caught up in the air,  
This heavenly supper in heaven to share.<sup>21</sup>

The hope expressed in this hymn for the coming reign of God was not an empty longing for the end of the age. Wesley strove to make his Christian hope embodied in acts of service among the poor. Since the Eucharist is a "representation of the Kingdom in the *world*"; it is impossible to lock up the Kingdom in the Church, it is equally impossible to make this sacrament of the Kingdom a purely churchly event."<sup>22</sup>

A deacons' preparation of the table prior to the gathered community's celebration, their role as assistant to the presiding elder during the service, and their final sending forth to serve in the world all highlight the gathered community's anticipation of God's reign. Rather than viewing the preparation of the Table as a menial service, one is invited to see that it is a preparing now for a eucharistic celebration that precedes the hoped-for "heavenly supper in heaven to share." In

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<sup>19</sup> Pirozzi, Edward R., *Locating the Separation of Charity from Eucharistic Worship in the Ancient Western Church*, Th.D. dissertation, (Boston: Boston University School of Theology, 1998), p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright documents this connection at length in *Eucharist and Eschatology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> (*Ibid.*, p. 129), from Wesley's Hymns on the Lord's Supper, no 92, vv. 8,10,12. This hymn illustrates much of what the church has lost over the years. There appears to have been a steady decline in the number of hymns dealing with eschatological themes in church hymnals.

<sup>22</sup> (*Ibid.*, p. 131).

assisting the elder at the table the deacon demonstrates partnership in representative ministry and assists the elder in raising the cup, holding the book, and in making sure that other details are taken care of.<sup>23</sup> This "table service" highlights all Christians' service in the world that here is focused upon and recognized as sacred.

After the Eucharist is celebrated, the gathered community leaves the sanctuary, to work for and **prepare** in their daily lives of service for the coming of God's reign. The final words in the liturgy for Holy Communion are appropriately proclaimed by the deacon:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery  
in which you have given yourself to us.  
Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit,  
to give ourselves for others,  
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

This is a vivid example of the deacon's call to interrelate "worship in the gathered community with service to God in the world."<sup>24</sup> The deacon acts as a visual reminder of our outward orientation in the preparation of the table and at the end of the liturgy in the sending forth of all God's people in the ministries of service in the world.

The deacon helps members of a congregation make this connection between worship and service in all of his/her preaching and teaching. I was recently told a story of a Roman Catholic deacon who was observed by a young member of a confirmation class as he served the homeless in a church basement food line and also prepared the table and assisted in the Eucharist in the sanctuary upstairs. After seeing both actions done by the deacon the confirmand remarked, "Oh yeah, that makes sense. The deacon serves food to the homeless and he serves at the Eucharist too."

The deacon's representative ministry in the celebration of Holy Communion and their historic tie to service among the poor is a challenge to contemporary deacons as they seek to live in the tension between the "now" and the "not yet" of God's reign. Involvement in ministries among the poor may require deacons to make difficult choices and accept the charge that they received at ordination to carry out their ministry "even in the face of hardship and personal

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<sup>23</sup> Ormonde Plater provides a detailed description of the function of Episcopal deacons in the Eucharist and other liturgies in his fine book, *Deacons in the Liturgy*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse, 1992). The deacon's "go-between" identity may be observed throughout this book.

<sup>24</sup> *The Book of Discipline for the United Methodist Church, 1996*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), p. 186.

sacrifice." Writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, Patrick McCaslin and Michael Lawler suggest that poverty is a primary charism required of a deacon.<sup>25</sup> Like the circuit riders of frontier Methodism, United Methodist deacons are called to a difficult life of service where the "not yet" dimensions of God's reign may be known all too well.

### *Weddings and the Deacon's Ecumenical Opportunity*

Jesus' prayer for his disciples "that they may be one" has fueled the ecumenical movement for decades. Jesus' prayer for unity in the wider church is represented in services of Holy Matrimony, albeit in a microcosm. In marriage the couple announces their hope for their future life of growth into 'one body.' The gathered witnesses join the couple in the ceremony as they begin their life together to give them the needed guidance and support to help make this hoped for unity a reality in the present. The hoped-for unity in marriage is a powerful symbol for the unity of the church. Ephesians 5:31-32 states: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church." As marriage is a picture of the union of Christ and the church, marriage is also a testimony against the endless divisions which seem to pre-occupy so much local church and denominational energy. A deacon's opportunity to preside at services of Holy Matrimony is an opportunity to re-present Jesus' prayer.

Anglicans and Lutherans in their joint publication, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, emphasize the eschatological reign of God brought into being and anticipated by the Christ through the Holy Spirit. Rather than viewing the restoration of the diaconate in minimalist terms regarding a deacon's function or ontological arguments of ordination, the Anglican-Lutheran Hanover Report urges that the diaconate be given a "specifically ecclesiastical location and expression." The Report argues at length for an eschatological perspective and an emphasis on Christian mission to bring about the reign of God. This has helped to re-focus recent ecumenical dialogues on the purposes of Christian mission rather than on historic divisions. Deacons across denominational boundaries are called to "bring into focus central aspects of the mission of the entire church."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> McCaslin, Patrick and Michael Lawler, *Sacrament of Service: A Vision of the Permanent Diaconate Today*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, Published for the Anglican Consultative council and the Lutheran World Federation, 1996, p. 21.

The chosen seven in Acts 6 whom church tradition has often considered the first deacons exemplified this call to unity around the central aspects mission. Luke tells his readers in Acts 6:1 that there was strife between the Hellenists and the Hebrews in Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> The seven who were chosen to minister among the widows and orphans in the Hellenist community were most likely leaders of the Hellenist community in Jerusalem. By choosing the seven, the apostles also proclaimed the equality of the Hellenist and Hebrew communities in the Jerusalem church and demonstrated the apostles' desire for unity among the community of believers.

Deacons are well suited to forming working relationships across denominations and with other religious traditions as they find common ground in ministries of mercy and social justice. In local communities where multiple churches or religious traditions exist but have not previously cooperated a great deal, the deacon could serve as a kind of ecumenical "go-between" or emissary among these various groups as they work to initiate cooperative ministries which anticipate the coming reign of God. This too has been emphasized in a 1997 ecumenical consultation among British Methodists, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and other groups in Windsor, England. The *Windsor Statement on the Diaconate* states:

Within and across the denominations, the roles can and do, differ. We increasingly perceive our role to be pioneering and prophetic, responding to the needs within and beyond the Church. Opening doors of opportunity, encouraging others to take risks, the contemporary diaconate acting in its capacity as 'agent of change,' engages imaginatively and collaboratively with issues of justice, poverty, social and environmental concerns. We often find ourselves spanning boundaries, especially official ones of Church and society, We believe that the time is right for the churches together to explore what the Spirit is saying and address the many issues raised by diaconal experience.<sup>28</sup>

### *Funerals*

A deacon's role in presiding at services of death and resurrection is yet another opportunity to emphasize all Christians' common baptismal calling to a life of service. Funerals are grounded in the hope of the resurrection of Jesus and his anticipated return. The bereaved persons are comforted by this hope. In funerals, the gathered community is reminded of their common call of discipleship as they remember and celebrate the life of a disciple who has gone

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<sup>27</sup> . The Hellenists tended to interpret the Mosaic laws somewhat more loosely than the Hebrews.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Pemble, Richard, "Is the Diaconate 'the' Ecumenical Office?" *Deacon Digest*, September/October, 1998, p. 8. The *Windsor Statement* may be found on the internet at [www.societies.anglican.org/dace/](http://www.societies.anglican.org/dace/).

before them. The deceased person is then entrusted to God, whom the congregation also is learning to trust.

A white cloth is often laid over the casket to remind all present of the deceased person's baptism and the "dying with Christ and the eventual raising with Christ" that was already symbolized in the person's baptism. As baptism represented the hope of a life of Christian discipleship and mission to the world, so does death represent the hope of a life to come where the faithful joins the "great cloud of witnesses" who have gone before. The following words from the United Methodist Service of Death and Resurrection point to this eschatological connection: "Receive us also, and raise us into a new life. Help us so to love and serve you in this world that we may enter into your joy in the world to come."<sup>29</sup> The deacon can help to accentuate the connection between service in the world and the expected joy in the world to come.

## **Conclusion**

These reflections on the diaconate have been set in the context of what a deacon does in the celebrations of Christian worship, in dialogue with Scripture and church tradition. Whether it is in the Eucharist where God's reign is proclaimed or on a street corner where kingdom values are demonstrated among the homeless, the deacon's task is always to be a representative pointing to the hope that is ours as a Christian people. The development of the Order of Deacon in United Methodism cannot afford to limit itself to past visions of the diaconate. It must draw on its heritage while also looking forward to a future, imaginative, and creative understanding of what this Order can mean for the continued renewal of the church and the coming reign of God. The new Order of Deacon will challenge our denomination to expand its vision for the reign of God as it leads all baptized believers in ministries in the world. The Annual Conference I spoke of at the start of this article sang "Soon and Very Soon" as part of its memorial service in order to emphasize our common Christian hope. May deacons around the world in United Methodism and many other denominations join together in proclaiming that unending hymn in their lives of worship and service as well.

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<sup>29</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), p. 150.