

The Diaconate: a flagship ministry?

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Abstract

The churches have been struggling with the identity of the diaconate and the meaning of this ministry remains unresolved in some traditions. Major developments in modern Christianity – the missionary, ecumenical, liturgical, charismatic, biblical theology and *ressourcement* movements – impact on the diaconate. In particular, research into classical and New Testament Greek usage of the *diakon-* words suggests that our understanding of the diaconate today needs to be reconstructed to reflect the Pauline sense of *diakonia* as a commissioned ministry of the gospel.

Keywords: Diaconate; Deacon; Ministry; John N. Collins; Mission.

Introduction

The diaconate has been in a state of ferment in many churches for decades and the debate shows no sign of ending. Why are churches wrestling with diaconal ministry to this extent? Individual deacons may well be blessed with a fruitful ministry, but the churches are struggling to identify just what a deacon is. Why is the issue proving so difficult? Does it mean that we cannot make sense of the diaconate, that it is an enigma that we cannot resolve, an insoluble problem? I take the diaconate to be indeed the most problematic but, at the same time, the most promising of all the ministries of the Church. I believe that the way to greater clarity about the diaconate depends on our willingness to allow our understanding of *diakonia* to become conformed to the paradigm that we find in the New Testament, particularly, though not exclusively, in the letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles. The churches have been agonising endlessly about the diaconate, but in this paper I shall argue that much of their perplexity is created by theologising on a false premise concerning biblical interpretation.

The Diaconate as an Ecumenical Issue

Most churches have a ministry of deacons, but the form that the diaconate takes varies widely. In the Orthodox tradition the deacon is mainly (but not only) a

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liturgical assistant and may remain a deacon for many years. The historic Protestant churches have a tradition of deacons as pastoral workers active in the social or health care or educational work of the Church, rather than as directly involved in proclamation. Luther and Calvin identified the Seven in Acts 6 as the first deacons and interpreted their work as serving at meal tables (an interpretation that has recently been challenged, as we shall see). While some Lutheran churches (Sweden, Iceland, Estonia) have an ordained diaconate within a threefold ministry, others (Finland, Norway) are still finding it difficult to decide whether deacons should be ordained or not.² In the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Old Catholic traditions the diaconate is the first of the three orders of deacon, priest and bishop: a step towards ordination to the presbyterate. The Roman Catholic Church has a large permanent diaconate, made up of married men who, of course, cannot be priested in that church.

The Churches of the Anglican Communion, especially The Episcopal Church in the USA, also have many 'distinctive' (not necessarily permanent) deacons. The Church of England has wrestled with the diaconate over many years.³ On the one hand, it knows that it cannot be right to see deacons simply as probationary, apprentice priests; on the other hand, most Church of England dioceses are not geared up, administratively speaking, to take advantage of what distinctive deacons can contribute, and in any case most parishes want eucharistic presidents (i.e. priests/presbyters), not someone who cannot preside at the Lord's table. In the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the ordination service and the document *What is a Deacon* suggest that deacons are ordained primarily to a pastoral role, one of witness through service (though not one divorced from worship), rather than a ministry that is related directly to word and sacrament.⁴ It seems that any preaching ministry that a Methodist deacon may have is incidental, so to speak, to the formal intention of the ordination rite since it belongs to their original commissioning as Local Preachers. However, the practice and experience of the Methodist Diaconal Order actually goes somewhat beyond the official theory – in the right direction in my view, that is to say a proclamatory, missiological direction.

There is another difference between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican understandings of ordination, on the one hand, and those of most Protestant churches (particularly Lutheran and Methodist churches), on the other: this is the question of sequential versus direct ordination to the presbyterate. Sequential (rather than direct) ordination, which is practised by most churches that have a threefold ordained ministry, means that the unique character of diaconal ministry is not left behind when a deacon is ordained priest/presbyter – just as priestly ministry is not

² See Tiit Pädam, 'Towards a Common Understanding of Diaconal Ministry: Recent Developments in the Diaconate among the Porvoo Churches', *Ecclesiology* 8.3 (2012), 326-349. Cf. also my Editorial, 'Wrestling with the Diaconate', *Ecclesiology*, 5 (2009), 3-6.

³ See recently the reports *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England* (Church House Publishing, 2001) and *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* (GS MISC 854; Council for Christian Unity, Church House, Westminster SW1P 3AZ, UK, 2007): <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1229854/gsmisc%20854.pdf>

⁴ *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), 313-328. www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co_what_is_a_deacon0704.doc

abandoned when a person is ordained to the episcopate. The character of the order remains; it forms the foundation for whatever is added in order to supplement, complement or enlarge it, whether that is priesthood or episcopate. But sequential ordination raises the question quite acutely: what is special or unique about the ministry of a deacon? What is *diakonia*? Before I give my own answer to that question, I want to note several developments in the life of the Christian Church over the past century that have contributed to a profound change in our understanding and practice of diaconal ministry.

Ecclesiological Renewal in the Twentieth Century

Our reception of the diaconate today, as of many other aspects of the Church's worship, ministry and mission, has been shaped by several great movements of renewal within the Church in the twentieth century. Historians of the modern Church tend to identify up to five renewal movements in the Church during the twentieth century: the missionary, ecumenical, liturgical, charismatic and biblical theology movements. Between them these transformed the theology and practice of the churches in their respective areas.⁵

But running not so much alongside as within each of these streams of renewal was a movement of theological regeneration through a return to the sources of patristic, medieval and Reformation theology - of *ressourcement* in the widest sense. This has brought about a profound interaction and mutual enrichment of Christian traditions. For example, Orthodoxy was helped to return to its roots by appropriating Roman Catholic patristic studies, while Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism have imbibed the concept of 'eucharistic ecclesiology' from Orthodox theologians.⁶ During the nineteenth century, in the Church of England, the Tractarians promoted translations of the Fathers and made available the works of the Caroline and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglican divines, from Richard Hooker onwards, while the Parker Society responded in kind by publishing the writings of the English Reformers in a handsome collected edition that is still useful. Meanwhile, on the European Continent J. P. Migne's huge collected editions of the *Patrologia Latina* and the *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* of the mid-nineteenth century were, we might say, complemented by the great Weimar edition of the works of Martin Luther (1883-), together with the *Corpus Reformatorum* edition of the works of Calvin, Melancthon and Zwingli (1834-) and other critical editions of the works of various Reformers. The familiar Latin-English Blackfriars edition of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (1963-) may stand for a much wider project of the re-appropriation of medieval theology. And this is merely a selective sample of the classic sources that have

⁵ See e.g., Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (2nd edn, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity* (London: 1986); Jeremy Morris, *The Church in the Modern Age* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

⁶ See Paul McPartlan, 'Catholic Learning and Orthodoxy - The Promise and Challenge of Eucharistic Ecclesiology', 160-175 and Andrew Louth, 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - An Orthodox Perspective', 361-372, at 365, both in Paul D. Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Also: Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (eds), *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

helped to revitalise Christian theology in an ecumenical and cross-confessional way. Here are ample raw materials that have helped to resource theological reflection on the nature and mission of the Church. It is precisely such a return to the sources, in a thorough, careful and reflective way, in the work of John N. Collins that is helping us to get clarity about the diaconate.⁷

Each of these major movements of thought and experience – the missionary, ecumenical, liturgical, charismatic, biblical theology and *ressourcement* movements – had significant ecclesiological import. They reshaped and re-energised our appreciation of the Church of Jesus Christ. The twentieth century could be said to have been the century of the Church – that is to say the era when the nature and mission of the Church became the central focus of theological research and reflection, but not, generally speaking, in an introverted, navel-gazing way, but rather focusing on the Church as the privileged instrument of God's mission in the world. The phenomenon of ecclesiological renewal, fed by these six tributaries, has deepened and enriched our understanding and experience of the Christian ministry and of the diaconate in particular. As a consequence, it is not too much to say that our understanding of the diaconate is currently in the melting pot. In this short paper, I will attempt to show in outline how our appreciation of the diaconate has been shaped by each of these remarkable movements. I write as a deacon – that is to say, someone who was ordained deacon in 1975, though also ordained priest-presbyter a year later – and for whom the diaconal foundation of ministry remains vital.

Deacons and the Missionary Movement

In broad terms, the modern missionary movement ran from the mid-eighteenth century until the Second World War and the ensuing Chinese Communist Revolution.⁸ It was a centrifugal movement from the global West to the global South and East. Now it is being reversed as certain countries – South Korea is a notable example – return the compliment and export their own missionaries, even to the nominally Christian West. But even more significant than the geographical boomerang effect of the missionary impulse is the spiritual and theological *internalising* of the missionary mind-set, as churches in the West have steadily adopted mission as their top priority and now struggle to turn themselves into missionary churches, or mission-shaped churches, for the re-evangelisation of their nominally Christian nations. In the face of numerical decline, the secularisation of public life, assertive atheism, the resurgence of Islam and the idolatrous gods of consumerism, the western churches know that they must grow or gradually die out.

A mission-shaped church needs a mission-shaped ministry. It needs an outward-facing ministry as well as one that can build up the already existing body of Christ. In episcopally-ordered churches, bishops must be 'bishops in mission' as 'the chief pastors of all that are within their diocese, as well laity as clergy' (as Canon C 18 of

⁷ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁸ See, e.g, Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

the Church of England puts it). Clergy and other ministers must forsake their comfort zones and re-invent themselves as apostles to the unchurched. Readers, Local Preachers and other lay ministers must become orientated to those outside the worshipping community as well as to those within. But the missionary reshaping of the Church's ministry bears particularly closely on deacons. In recent work on the diaconate, deacons are portrayed as heralds of the gospel (as in the Church of England's *Common Worship Ordinal*), as ambassadors for Christ, as 'go-betweens', bringing together the eucharistic life of the worshipping community and the needs of those currently beyond the fold, but not beyond its reach. We may be tempted to ask: "Is this a case of the Church arbitrarily imposing its anxiety about outreach and evangelisation on to deacons, so that they are made to carry most of the burden? Does it mean that the presbyterate is failing and that deacons must redress the balance?" There may be an element of truth in both of these explanations, but there is a much more solid and profound reason in biblical theology why the deacon should be seen as an ordained missionary in every community, and we will come to that shortly.

Deacons and the Ecumenical Movement

The institutional phase of the ecumenical movement is often said to have begun with the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, though this great event was certainly able to build on earlier initiatives.⁹ But has the ecumenical movement, like the historic missionary movement, now come to an end? There is talk, not all of it well-informed, of an 'ecumenical winter' and it is true that the nature of ecumenism has changed in the last decade or so. Ecumenism has entered a new phase: it is more realistic and less utopian; more respectful than it sometimes was in the past of the distinctive identities of the participating traditions and the need to cherish these as churches come closer together; its operative concept of unity is more organic and less institutional than in its hey-day in the 1960s. Ecumenical activity in the form of local cooperation in worship, witness and outreach, together with shared resources and expertise at the national level, and theological dialogue both national and international, is still a marked feature of the Christian churches in many parts of the world.

But there is another important way in which ecumenism is changing and that is the coming together and the holding together of mission and unity: a united church in mission, a missionary church acting as one, is now central to the ecumenical vision.¹⁰ This development marks the return full circle to the origins of the ecumenical movement on the mission field, where a concern for united witness and proclamation and for the overcoming of damaging divisions and rivalries that discredited the gospel and the Church, motivated the first steps towards unity. But what is equally remarkable is that the internalising of the missionary impulse has been matched by an internalising of the ecumenical impulse. There are

⁹ See Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Also Jeremy Morris, 'Edinburgh 1910-2010: A Retrospective Assessment', *Ecclesiology* 7.3 (2011), 297-316.

¹⁰ See Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

unreconstructed exceptions, but for most Christians in the developed world it is now second nature to think and relate ecumenically. The way that the ecumenical movement has begun to transform the churches' attitudes to one another, from a toxic combination of hostility, competition, ignorance and fear, to a beneficent blend of friendship, mutual appreciation, collaboration and reciprocal enrichment, has been widely absorbed into the way of thinking and behaving of church leaders, clergy and lay people.

Renewal of the diaconate has taken place on an ecumenical basis through cross-fertilisation, the sharing of experiences, liturgies and theologies, both formally and informally. We might think of the Anglican-Lutheran *Hanover Report: The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity* (1996), the consultations on the diaconate between the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, on the one hand, and the British and Irish Anglican Churches, on the other, under the Porvoo Agreement of 1996, and the consultations between deacons of the Methodist Church of Great Britain and of the Church of England under the Anglican-Methodist Covenant of 2003.¹¹ I know from personal involvement in these consultations that remarkable convergence has been discovered at an experiential level, even where official theologies and liturgies do not entirely match up. That experiential convergence focuses on the renewed missiological understanding of the deacon's role. There is much that we can all learn from each other about the meaning of *diakonia* through in-depth ecumenical interaction.

Deacons and the Liturgical Movement

The Liturgical Movement has had a double focus. The first is on the centrality of the eucharistic liturgy in the Church's worship, through the Parish Communion movement in the Church of England, for example, but in a way that has affected all the churches that have been shaped by the Reformation or by its heritage.¹² The second focus is on the patterns of worship of the early Church, as evidenced in its liturgical texts, taken as models. Both of these aspects contribute to a greater seriousness, coupled with a stronger sense of celebration, in the performance of the liturgy. The Liturgical Movement has helped us to see that it is the people corporately (priest and congregation) that celebrate the sacrament; what the priest/presbyter does is to preside in a doubly-representative role, standing in the place of Christ at his supper (*in persona Christi*) in ministering word and sacrament, and articulating the response of the people to God's grace (*in persona ecclesiae*).

¹¹ For the Anglican-Lutheran *Hanover Report: The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity* see: http://www.aco.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/lutheran/docs/pdf/the_hanover_report.pdf. For the Porvoo Agreement of 1996 see: http://www.porvoochurches.org/interchange/consultation_on_diaconate_London_2006.php and <http://www.porvoochurches.org/sharedassets/icemedia/Diakonia%202nd%20consultation%20Oslo%202009.doc>. In addition, see *Embracing the Covenant: Quinquennial Report (2008) of the Joint Implementation Commission under the Covenant between The Methodist Church of Great Britain and The Church of England* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 18-20; *Moving Forward in Covenant: Interim Report (2011) of the Joint Implementation Commission [etc.]* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2011), 12-13. A further consultation is planned for late 2012.

¹² Donald Gray, *Earth and Altar: The Evolution of the Parish Communion in the Church of England to 1945* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, for The Alcuin Club, 1986).

In some traditions, notably the Orthodox, deacons have a well-defined role in the celebration of the liturgy, assisting the bishop or priest (not presiding themselves) and drawing the people into the liturgical action. For the Church of England, *Common Worship* provides guidelines for the deacon's role in worship.¹³ However, a deacon who had a purely liturgical function would find their ministry impoverished because they would be segregated from the mission of the Church in terms of its outreach to the unchurched, particularly those on the margins and in special need. But equally, a deacon who was not integrated into the Church's worship and lacked a role in the liturgy would find their ministry much diminished. Deacons who are excluded from the liturgy are distanced from the core actions of the Church in terms of word and sacrament, from what builds up the Body of Christ. I find it helpful to think of the deacon as one who goes out from the worshipping heart of the Church to those beyond its boundaries, but who then gathers the needs of the community and draws them into the celebration of the Eucharist, not only through personal representation, but particularly in leading or shaping the intercessions.

Deacons and the Charismatic Movement

The Charismatic Movement has made the Church more conscious of its total dependence on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. As a Spirit-bearing, Spirit-filled body, the Church is constituted by the Holy Spirit. Its ministries are given by the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit. Ordination is an epicletic event, when the Church calls down the gifts and power of the Spirit on the new minister. The enhanced awareness of the Holy Spirit, that we owe in part to the Charismatic Movement, has begun to transform worship and to re-energise mission. It has also left its mark on theology, with a number of major theological studies being devoted to the Holy Spirit, and in terms of method and structure, ensuring that theology should be truly trinitarian.¹⁴

How does all this affect deacons? The Holy Spirit is *sent* into the world from the risen, ascended, glorified Jesus Christ, who was himself *sent* by the Father. As he bestows his gift of the Spirit, Christ sends his apostles ('sent ones') into the world. Christ's sending by the Father, his sending of the apostles, his gift of the Spirit and his bestowal of authority upon them for ministry are indissoluble: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"' (John 20.21-22, NRSV). The Holy Spirit is the missionary Spirit, the one who is sent and who sends. If we can see ordination to the diaconate as the fundamental commissioning or *sending* of all ordained ministry,

¹³ *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 158-159.

¹⁴ For purposes of illustration, I give one Roman Catholic, one Protestant and one ecumenical example: Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman; New York: Seabury Press, 1983); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power in the Power of the Spirit* (ET London: SCM Press, 1977); *The Forgotten Trinity* (London: British Council of Churches, 1989; reprinted – report, study guide and selected papers – London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2011).

in line with St Paul's use of *diakonos* and *diakonia*, we can learn to see the deacon as a person who is *sent* into the world in the power of the Spirit, on behalf of Christ and the Church, and who then helps to gather Christ's lost sheep into the fold. But this is to anticipate what I want to come to next.

Deacons and Biblical Theology – Returning to the Sources

Now we can return to the question with which we began: What is *diakonia*? Tradition and much current practice answer this question very simply, in terms of servanthood, or humble service. Deacons are said to represent and model servanthood for the Church. The received wisdom is that they are ordained to serve. Service is the keynote of much of the rhetoric about deacons. But this 'servant' construction is patently inadequate; it has been recycled too many times without a good enough theological justification. The traditional line makes great play of the fact that a deacon serves those to whom he or she is sent. It sounds genuinely heroic to say that deacons spend themselves in selfless service to the poor, the marginalised and the weak. However, whilst such service may be important, Christian approaches to this engagement have been developed and challenged by liberation theology's understanding of a 'preferential option for the poor'.¹⁵ Moreover, what I want to call into question here is that service to the poor is what defines the deacon's ministry.

All Christians – whether lay or ordained – are called to exercise humility and to be servants of Christ, of one another, and of those in need. Are not priests and bishops called to serve Christ's flock? Are not all lay people also called to serve? Ordination is surely not about embodying an ethical attribute (humility) or a virtuous disposition (the spirit of service). Nor can ordination be meant to provide an opportunity for a person to exhibit what all Christians are meant to do all the time. It must be more than that! As I see it, ordination embodies the mission of God (*missio dei*) in the life and work of a particular individual on behalf of the Church. The mission of God, as it is received by the Church, takes the form of the Church's primary tasks of the ministry of word, of the sacraments and of pastoral responsibility. Ordination is task-orientated, not virtue orientated, and the tasks (*munera*) are not chosen by the individual as a matter of personal preference, but are given by the Church, because they are first given *to* the Church by its Lord, notably in the Great Commission of Matthew 28.16-end.16 The logic of this theology of ordination calls into question the traditional interpretation of the Greek *diakon*- root as servanthood and demands an alternative interpretation of this term.

In attempting to define the diaconate, it obviously makes sense to take into account the needs of the world within which deacons minister. But the world's needs are extremely diverse and almost infinite. Christian ministry and mission cannot be defined primarily by the needs that call for attention in the world. It would also be responsible, in defining the diaconate, to be guided as far as possible by the tradition of the Church through the ages. But this too is very varied: the diaconate has meant

¹⁵ See, for example, Christopher Rowland, *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ See further Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

many things in the past two thousand years; in fact it has had a rather chequered history, to say the least. But above all it is vital to be guided by the New Testament – and this is where the resurgence of biblical theology comes into play. But to derive our understanding of the diaconate from the New Testament is not a straightforward matter. It is widely agreed that there were no deacons as we know them in the New Testament, that is to say persons ordained for a professional life-long ministry as part of a three-fold order. The passage in Acts 6 is ambiguous: the Seven are not called deacons and the only thing that we know about their work (and we hear only of Stephen and Philip) is that they were gifted evangelists. The mention of *diakonoi* in Philippians 1.1 is not given any specific content in its context and is unlikely to refer to an established office. The moral and spiritual qualities that should characterise deacons are given in 1 Timothy 3.8-13, but there is no indication of what these deacons actually did in their ministry.

The New Testament does little to fill in the content of diaconal ministry; there is no job description. What we do have is an abundance of examples of the actual *usage* of *diakon-* words in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline letters. It is right to ask ourselves, therefore: How can we now relate to this usage; how can the Church connect with it? Some may say that it does not need to do so – that in the absence of clear biblical guidance, the Church can improvise its diaconal ministry, adapting it to the needs of the moment in a highly pragmatic way (as has often been done and is still being done on a grand scale). But I doubt whether anyone would say the same – that we can make it up as we think best – about the ministry of priests or bishops: they are thought to have rather more *givenness* about them! No, to have theological integrity, our own use of *diakonos* and *diakonia* should be consonant with New Testament usage of those terms; it should *resonate* with it and be empowered by it. It seems probable that *diakon-* language is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament, but one set of uses seems particularly significant.¹⁷

Paul speaks frequently of himself as *diakonos* and of the *diakonia* with which he has been entrusted. He associates these terms closely with his commissioning as an apostle. He is a *diakonos* through whom people have been brought to faith (1 Corinthians 3.5). God has made him a *diakonos* of the new covenant and has entrusted him with the ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 3.6; 5.18), the ministry of the gospel of the glory of Christ and of his lordship (2 Corinthians 4.1-6). In Ephesians, Paul (or 'Paul') speaks of himself as a *diakonos* through the gift of God's grace and power (3.7). This sense of *diakonos* makes it a close cousin of

¹⁷ For the argument that follows I am indebted to and generally persuaded by Collins, *Diakonia* (see footnote 7). A more accessible presentation of his views is id., *Deacons and the Church* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002). Collins' interpretation is significantly substantiated by Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament: Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). Hentschel's work is a parallel exercise in New Testament interpretation, not a discussion of Collins' thesis. But it does appear to converge in some key respects with Collins' interpretation. See further J.N. Collins, 'Ordained and Other Ministries: Making a Difference', *Ecclesiology* 3.1 (2006), 11-32; id., 'Theology of Ministry in the Twentieth Century: Ongoing Problems or New Orientations?', *Ecclesiology* 8.1 (2012), 11-32; id., 'Reinterpreting *diakonia* in Germany' [Article Review of Hentschel], *Ecclesiology* 5.1 (2009), 69-81. For an appraisal of Collins' approach see Paula Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins', *Ecclesiology* 3.1 (2006), 33-56.

apostolos. Paul uses both terms of himself almost interchangeably. What links them together is the idea of commissioning, of being sent out to fulfil a task on behalf of the one who has the authority to send. It is generally agreed among biblical scholars that *apostolos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *shaliach*, a derivative of the verb 'to send', which in the Septuagint (LXX) is regularly translated by *apostellein*. The *shaliach* was an envoy who represented someone in authority for a particular purpose. In receiving the *shaliach* you received the one who was represented.

The Pauline material is crucial for the reconstruction of *diakonia*, but it does not stand alone and unsupported. For Luke too, in the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, *diakonia* was a sacred mandate that had to be carried out. A *diakonos* in ancient usage is one who is commissioned to fulfil a vital task, to carry out a mission on behalf of another, an executive who acts on behalf of a constituted authority. Although Acts 6 has generally been taken to support the 'service' understanding of the diaconate, it is surely significant that not only were the Seven never called 'deacons', but also that in 6.4 Luke uses the verb *diakonein* to refer to the ministry of the word by the Apostles and stresses that this was their first priority. This is in fact Luke's characteristic use of the term throughout Luke-Acts. The trend is set in the first chapter of the Acts when a successor to Judas has to be found to make up the number twelve. The special apostolic mission to witness to the risen Lord and to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8) is termed *diakonia*. Moreover, *diakonia* is paralleled with the calling of the Apostles: 'this ministry and apostleship' (1.25). If we let the reconstructed sense of *diakonia* as commissioned agency have its due weight, we see how closely it corresponds in Paul and Luke to apostleship.

This conjunction of meanings suggests a radical alternative reading of Acts 6, which Collins expounds.¹⁸ In Acts 6, according to Collins, Luke is not concerned with the fair sharing out of food at all. His focus is on the progress and spread of the word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ (6.7). The episodes that follow – Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, Philip's biblical exposition to the Ethiopian official, and the conversion of Saul – bear this out. Then, when Paul has completed his three great missionary journeys and takes stock in his address to the Ephesian elders, he sums up his apostolic ministry as 'the *diakonia* that I have received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace' (Acts 20.24). Collins therefore argues, on the basis of ancient Greek usage of this term and in the light of the Lukan context, that the daily *diakonia* in which the widows were being neglected was not the distribution of food, but the ministry of the word. It seems that the Greek-speaking widows needed to hear it in their own tongue and in their own homes. We cannot be sure that this reinterpretation is correct, but it has at least as much to commend it as the traditional interpretation that makes Acts 6 the basis of the 'servanthood' model.

If the meaning of *diakon-* words in these Pauline and Lukan sources is dynamic and functional, by the time we reach the Pastoral Epistles, function has begun to give way to office: the deacons have become a distinct cadre of ministers, just as the *episcopoi* have. Thus several deacons minister on behalf of one *episkopos*. Linked with the male deacons, probably, are women deacons (the reference to women is

¹⁸ Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 47-58.

sandwiched between instructions regarding deacons) who have specific but similar instructions given to them (1 Timothy 3.11). Though the *charismata* of prophecy, etc., are still present in the Pastorals, there is the beginning of a shift from the charismatic to the structural and institutional. This development is apparent not only in the Pastorals but also in the early post-apostolic writings, but it should not be exaggerated. The process of development has a certain logic: *diakonia* could readily become the term for an office (and later an order) in the Church because all along it carried connotations of commissioning, authority and mission.

It is, I suggest, the New Testament usage of *diakonos* and *diakonia*, in passages such as these, where Paul and Luke interpret *diakonia* as a God-given, Christ-centred, gospel-focused ministry of proclamation, that we should take as the benchmark for our own use of these terms. In Paul's case particularly, *diakonia* is his fundamental commissioning as a minister of the gospel of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. When we allow that language and that meaning to shape our understanding of the ministry of the deacon, we find ourselves speaking of the deacon as a herald of the gospel and a steward of the mysteries of Christ, as an envoy or ambassador on behalf of Christ and his Church. And that must mean that diaconal ministry cannot be a ministry that is something apart from the primary tasks of the Church, the modes in which the gospel is embodied and communicated: the ministry of the word, of the sacraments and of pastoral responsibility. The ministry of deacons, like that of priests and bishops, though without presidency and formal oversight, is constituted by its engagement with all three primary tasks of the Church, working alongside and in support of bishops and presbyters, and not by anything less or by anything other.

Conclusion

I confess to being a Land Rover fan, or perhaps I should say fanatic. I have owned two quite different models of the range and driven the others. It makes me happy to be in the driving seat of this uniquely capable vehicle, but since I live in a remote rural part of Devon, it is also handy to be able to get around in all conditions: snow is no problem. The current Land Rover slogan is *Go beyond!* Setting aside the fond dreams of adventure in uncharted regions of the world that these words are intended to conjure up for potential purchasers willing to empty their wallets, I like to take those words as summing up the essence of diaconal ministry: to go 'outside the camp' (Hebrews 13.13) where Jesus is to be found among those who endure abuse and indignity. Deacons lead the way for the Church in reaching out to the unchurched, in all their physical, social and spiritual needs, and in seeking to draw them, in the name of Christ, back into the blessed fellowship of Christ's Church and ultimately, through the stepping stones of Christian initiation, to share fully in the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁹

In *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, I have described the diaconate as 'a flagship ministry' because I see it as an ecclesial sign of what the whole Church in all its

¹⁹ On the missionary potential of Christian initiation understood as a journey of and to faith, see the report of the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission: Paul Avis (ed.), *The Journey of Christian Initiation: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011).

members is called to be.²⁰ The understanding of the diaconate that I have argued for in this paper is fully in line, I believe, with the way that the *Common Worship* ordinal of the Church of England characterises the ministry of deacons; and the description applies equally to both 'distinctive' deacons and those hoping to be ordained priest – the diaconate is one. This preamble to the 'Declarations' is remarkable for its resonances with the Pauline use of *diakon*- terms, while not abandoning the spirit of service and of care for the weak that must characterise all Christian ministry.

Deacons are called to work with the Bishop and the priests with whom they serve as heralds of Christ's kingdom. They are to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, as agents of God's purposes of love. They are to serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people. They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world that the love of God may be made visible. Deacons share in the pastoral ministry of the Church and in leading God's people in worship. They preach the word and bring the needs of the world before the Church in intercession. They accompany those searching for faith and bring them to baptism. They assist in administering the sacraments; they distribute communion and minister to the sick and housebound.²¹

I think that statement makes a fitting conclusion to this short exposition of the ministry of a deacon, whether it is in the form of the distinctive diaconate or that of the deacon who hopes to be priested, or of the deacon-priest who may be called to the episcopate.

www.theologyandministry.org

²⁰ Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, 103.

²¹ *Common Worship Ordination Services* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007); <http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/ordinal/deacons.aspx>

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