

THE CASE FOR A DISTINCTIVE DIACONATE

There are three outstanding reasons why the time is now ripe for the renewal of a 'distinctive diaconate'.

First, because it could and should become a symbol of the servant nature of the Church's ministry. As the Scottish ordinal (1984) puts it, "In baptism, every disciple is called to make Jesus known as Saviour and Lord and to share his work in renewing the world. In a distinctive way the deacon is a sign of that humility which marks all service offered in the name of Christ. He bears witness to his Lord who laid aside all claims of dignity, assumed the nature of a slave and accepted death on a cross." The deacon is a constant reminder to all of us of the primary work we are called to do with different gifts and in different ways. He or she epitomises service to others in the name of Christ. But as symbols of diaconia deacons stand for the importance of being as well as doing. As the delegates at a consultation on this subject at St George's, Windsor observed in 1995, 'Diaconal ministry is incarnational:- it is about being and persisting'. Deacons are there to 'lurk and loiter with intent', enabling lines of communication to be established in particular between the church and the world, and offering the world a sign of the Kingdom promised by God for all creation. By interpreting the world to the church and vice versa they can mirror God to both simply by being who and what they are.

Second, a distinctive diaconate could act as a focus for the ministry of all Christ's people in a way that our present 'transitional' diaconate never can. With one foot in the church, as it were, and another in the world a deacon would be well placed to 'inspire, promote and co-ordinate' the service of the whole church. In an age when the Christian faith is increasingly regarded as irrelevant, there is an ever growing need for the church to 'minister on the margins'. A distinctive diaconate would show the people of God what is required of them in the world; and show the world what the Gospel in practice really means. The leadership ministry of priests tends (and needs) to be quite church focused; and the ministry of deacons would complement this by being focused primarily on the wider community, with a particular emphasis on promoting social awareness and organising social action in a parish or pastoral unit. No wonder some Christians regard the renewal of the diaconate as a 'prophetic prompting of the Holy Spirit in a time of change'.

A third reason why the time is now ripe has to do with restoring the fullness of the traditional '3 fold order of ordained ministry' to the Church of England. Now that women can be ordained priest there is no good reason for delay. As long ago as 1974 the report 'Deacons in the Church' recommended the abolition of the transitional diaconate, arguing that if the diaconate is to have any significance it needs to 'exist in its own right'. This was building on Resolution 88 of the Lambeth Conference in 1958 which suggested that 'each province of the Anglican Communion should consider whether the office of deacon shall be restored to its primitive place as a distinct order of the church, instead of being regarded as a probationary period for the priesthood'. Both imply that calling probationary priests deacons simply 'compromises the integrity of the diaconate and degrades the office': a point seemingly ignored by the report commissioned by the House of Bishops in 1988 which unhelpfully nailed its colours to the fence by demanding that both sorts of diaconate (transitional and distinctive) should be maintained alongside each other. The alternatives are clear. Either we

restore the diaconate - or it should be abandoned. Admittedly Canon 32 in the Canons of 1604 assumes that the office of deacon is 'a step or degree to the ministry'. But there is a more ancient tradition of a distinctive diaconate 'in which the deacon remained for life and in which he acted as servant and administrator of the community in practical matters'. Indeed, regarding the ministry of the church as a 'graded succession of offices' counteracts any catholic and apostolic ecclesiology - and seriously undermines the biblical doctrine of the ministry of all God's people, the laos. The church's nature is organic, not hierarchical; and within that organism each 'order' and type of ministry is a distinct and distinctive vocation for which the Holy Spirit gifts and equips various members of the church as he wills. The 3-fold ordained ministry reflects and enables a Christ-like ministry of oversight; high-priesthood and service. Within that 3-fold pattern, deacons are not - and should never have been - 'mini priests' or 'probationers in waiting'. Despite its shortcomings, the 1988 report did ultimately recommend the restoration of an 'ordained, distinctive diaconate', with reasons based on Scripture, tradition and contemporary experience, which would seem to complement and affirm one another.

The argument from Scripture is based more on general principles and an 'emerging picture' than on any firmly established pattern. In Philippians 1.1 St Paul mentions bishops and deacons, which suggests that both were recognised officials of the church in Philippi. However he seems to have thought of ministry more in terms of 'function' than 'office', and from his point of view any specialised ministry performed by a 'deacon' would simply have expressed, in representative form, the 'service' which every member of the church was called to undertake. The so-called 'Seven' in the Acts of the Apostles were not officially deacons, but some aspects of their ministry (such as caring for the poor and needy) were later regarded as a model for the diaconate.

In the pastoral Epistles (e.g. 1 Tim. 3:8-13) the word 'deacon' is clearly used in a technical sense, and the qualifications for bishops (who were then the leaders of local congregations) and deacons were almost identical. Both offices were 'filled from respected members of the community'. At this early stage the deacons seem to have spent their time serving the poor and sick and doing charitable work. They were not, as yet, simply 'assistants' to the bishops, and they had no obvious prototypes either in Judaism or paganism.

This diaconal ministry was simply one aspect of the total ministry of God's people. It was obviously based on the servant ministry of Christ himself (cf John 13; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 10:43-45), and was more a matter of 'pioneering' and 'making possible' than 'doing instead of'. There was no distinction between 'clergy' and 'laity' of the kind that subsequently developed. Rather, all Christians were 'sent' by Christ to 'serve', and their authority lay in the Christ like service they rendered. So Paul describes his own ministry as that of being a 'servant' of the Gospel and the Church (Ephesians 3:7 and Colossians 1:23). Certain people with certain qualities and gifts were commissioned (often with the laying on of hands) to undertake certain tasks in the Early Church. These included deacons. But 'the ministry' of the church was the ministry of the whole laos - not just a few officials.

The argument from 'Tradition' hinges round the way in which the distinctive diaconate was subsequently devalued and eventually lost (at least in the Church of England). In the pre-Nicene era deacons were probably more significant than presbyters, who seem to have had a fairly limited role. They worked closely with the 'bishops' (who were still, for the most part, the equivalent of today's 'vicars') and may well have presided at the Eucharist when

there was no bishop present to do so (cf Ignatius). Ignatius, writing to the Trallians in 115 AD says that they should be respected as Jesus Christ himself - and that without the 3 orders of deacon, bishop and presbyter 'you cannot begin to speak of a church'. For the next 500 years or so (until Gregory the Great) deacons continued to oversee the work of pastoral care; administer the church's charities; assist the bishops (whom they sometimes succeeded in office); play a significant part in liturgy; and act as a fine symbol of the servant ministry of the whole body of Christ. References in the Shepherd of Hermas; Didache; Justin; Irenaeus and Tertullian reinforce this overall picture, with particular stress given by Tertullian to the organic and functional nature of the Church and its people. In the third century, deacons often had a prominent role in baptism (with naked deacons going into the water with naked candidates of the same sex and anointing their bodies), and in the didascalia we are told that bishops would delegate baptising either to deacons or presbyters (in that order). Under extreme circumstances deacons could also convey sacramental absolution - because it was "the church that possessed the ministry and the sacraments and administered the means of God's grace." At this stage there was no suggestion of 'grades', and the diaconate was seen as a permanent vocation. Deacons could, and sometimes did become bishops or presbyters - but that doesn't seem to have been the norm. So although in 218 AD Callistus (a deacon) succeeded Zephyrinus as pope over the head of the presbyter Hippolytus, for the most part deacons remained deacons in the post-apostolic, pre-Nicene period.

Changes gradually began to take place from the 4th century onwards. Some of these changes had their roots in the writings and influence of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, who was one of the first to make a distinction between clergy and 'laity'. As the Christian Church began to absorb secular pretensions of rank and status and copy imperial Rome its organic origins and functional concept of ministry disappeared. Deacons were thought to be getting 'above themselves' and were firmly 'put down' both by the Council of Arles (314) and Council of Nicea (325) which forbade them to preside at the Eucharist. Ministry was increasingly seen in terms of power rather than service - and as bishops became more like our 'rural deans' (with their own churches but also oversight of other churches in the area) so presbyters became more important. Indeed, their right to preside at the Eucharist was confirmed by the Council of Nicea. Having previously acted as members of a sort of local leadership team (with the 'bishop' as chairman), presbyters increasingly lost their corporate function and themselves became sole leaders of congregations. By the late 4th century the distinction between bishops and presbyters had become rather blurred; but the development of a vertical, hierarchical structure was illustrated by Ambrosiaster who talked about 'the greater order containing within itself the lesser'.

Deacons continued to assist presbyters in local churches, much as they had previously worked with 'bishops'; and after the emergence of 'dioceses' (365) those deacons who continued to work with bishops were called 'Archdeacons'. But as the presbyterate flourished, so (in direct proportion) the diaconate declined. Alcuin (who died in 804) remained a permanent deacon, but by his day 'orders' were increasingly seen as rungs on a ladder of preferment. The 'greatest' rung (the episcopate) was the sum of its lesser parts (cf. Council of Trullo 633) and the concept of all God's people being commissioned and empowered through baptism for ministry, with leaders specially authorised as part of that whole, was almost completely lost. 'Seniority' was further emphasised by the imposition of minimum ages - such that for a while nobody could be ordained deacon under 30, presbyter under 40 or bishop under 50 (Pope Siricius - late 4th century). The 'priesthood' which had previously been that of the whole church (1 Peter 2) was now closely associated with bishops

and presbyters, who were in due course themselves called 'priests'. In the liturgy, deacons acquired the prerogative of reading the Gospel at the Eucharist and dismissing the people; but at about the same time they seem to have lost their role in administering the bread and wine. In her late 4th century diary of a pilgrimage, Egeria comments on the fact that only the deacons remain standing while the bishop is present (everyone else sits); and it is a deacon who holds out a ring and phial for the people to kiss and venerate. Deacons also 'guarded the doors'; but their liturgical significance gradually diminished as the centuries went by.

During the Middle Ages a dualistic distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane' was taken for granted; and ordained ministry was increasingly known as 'the sacred ministry', with celibacy as a sign of the difference (signifying cultic purity). By now the diaconate had become almost entirely transitional; and the Canons of 1575 insist that candidates for ordination as deacon must be at least 23; give an account of their faith in Latin to the bishop; and remain deacon for at least a year before being admitted to the order of priesthood. Some of the rites originally connected with baptism were transferred to ordination - and ordination began to replace baptism altogether in people's minds as 'initiation into the church' and commissioning for ministry. Hand in hand with this went the medieval notion of 'ontological change'; an inevitable development given the way in which the word *laikos* had shifted from its original meaning in the New Testament ('one of God's people') to 'one of God's people not ordained' to 'profane'. (5th century). Ordination was seen as providing an additional 'injection' of grace, rather than 'calling forth and kindling the grace given in baptism for the public work of service in the church'. As many commentators now point out, this idea of an 'infused character' was quite foreign to the primitive church and consensus of the pre-Nicene age. It also runs counter to 'principles of renewal held in the historic Western churches today' (including Vatican II). We are learning to think in more relational terms; and can now see that seemingly harmless phrases like 'once a deacon always a deacon' denote the sort of rampant clericalism and 'omnivorous priesthood' that were so characteristic of the medieval church. Those who framed the Ordinal of 1550 accepted these medieval distortions and were scarcely influenced by the protest of reformers on the continent (especially Luther) and calls for the creation of a new kind of diaconate.

During the 17th-18th centuries even the transitional diaconate declined, and there were very few deacons then (except in the universities). Since there were few curacies and appointments were usually to take charge of a church, candidates were often ordained deacon and priest at the same time (or with a few days gap). However in the 19th century 'assistant curacies' were increasingly developed as training posts, and the diaconate was revived along apprenticeship lines, much as we still have it today. From 1861 women were made deaconesses for life, and more than 100 years later began to be 'ordained' deacon; but the permanence of that office was not, for most, their choice. Their predicament and the ongoing debate over women's ordination did however complicate the broader discussion of a distinctive diaconate; and it is only now that we can approach the whole issue of a 'confusion of orders' with relative equanimity.

Arguments from Scripture and tradition for the restoration of a distinctive diaconate are supported by arguments based on reason and contemporary experience. First, there is the Church's missionary prerogative which a permanent diaconate would greatly assist. Whereas 'ordained local ministry' seems to be a desperate attempt to maintain the Church's Eucharistic tradition, sometimes at the expense of its missionary calling, a distinctive diaconate would emphasise the need for the church to look outwards, and enable local groups

of Christians to become 'missionary congregations'. Second, the establishment of a proper diaconate would give further impetus to the current emphasis on collaborative ministry and leadership teams in parishes. It would help to clarify the role of priests - and would in many cases set them free to exercise that priestly role in a way which isn't always possible at present. For far too long priests have been trying to exercise the ministry of deacons as well as their own - whereas the two ministries should be complementary. Ideally most parishes would have several deacons, with one or two elected by the others to represent them on a leadership team; and CPSA regards this kind of reformation of the diaconate as an important aspect of the total renewal of God's church. As well as supporting and encouraging lay people in their ministries, deacons would release priests to exercise their role of leadership, and prevent them from having to be 'all things to all people all the time'.

Third, there is an important ecumenical dimension to all this which needs to be taken seriously. For instance, in 1967 the Roman Catholic church published its 'General Norms' for restoring a Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church' (though it has to be said that the Roman Catholics in particular find it hard to escape from an acutely hierarchical model of ministry). The Eastern Orthodox Church has retained a form of diaconate (though without any charitable functions); and there is widespread interest among nonconformist churches in the renewal or recovery of the diaconate. Calvin described such a diaconate as a 'permanent and necessary office' (Institutes) and there are many (non-ordained) deacons and deaconesses in the Reformed tradition serving as parish workers, missionaries and social workers. Some have had disciplinary duties such as waking up those who fall asleep during sermons! (cf Pilgrim Fathers). There are further examples of distinctive diaconates in the Church of Sweden; Methodist Church in New Zealand; and Episcopal Church in the USA. All around the world moves are afoot to abolish the old idea of the diaconate as a 'stepping stone' to priesthood (cf South Africa). Admittedly it doesn't always seem to work very well. For instance, the Scottish Episcopal Church has had a permanent diaconate open since 1968, but there have been very few candidates. On the other hand, major ecumenical reports such as LIMA; 'God's reign and our unity'; and the Porvoo declaration have all come out in favour of a 3-fold order of ministry which should include reform of the diaconate. For, as the Anglican/Reformed document so aptly puts it, "Not all the developments of the past nineteen centuries are to be regarded as divinely sanctioned simply because they have occurred"!

It does therefore seem very hard to justify retaining a 'transitional' diaconate. But rediscovering a permanent or distinctive diaconate obviously raises a number of practical issues which need careful consideration. First, there is the question of a Deacon's role. This needs to be flexible, depending in each case on individual gifts and the needs of the situation. However it should normally be worked out with reference to three main areas of ministry. One is liturgy. The key here lies in appreciating that deacons are not preachers. Preaching wasn't part of their function in the Early Church - and should not be so today. Historically, they have undertaken all sorts of liturgical tasks from lighting the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil to administering bread and wine at the Eucharist; and from reading the Gospel (which signifies their verbal witness to Christ) to baptising. Distributing 'extended' Communion to the sick after the main Sunday celebration is entirely appropriate; but presiding at a Communion service is not. Ideally deacons should be 'among' the worshipping congregation rather than 'speaking at them' - so that, in their various movements and liturgical actions, they can 'represent the dynamic movement between God and his people'.

Then there is a Pastoral role. The scope is endless, and could include baptism preparation; marriage preparation; organising house groups; counselling; co-ordinating visiting schemes - and also, where appropriate, praying with and anointing the sick (cf South African Theological Commission 1985). This pastoral care would link in with a crucial role in Social Action. Distinctive deacons would be responsible for spearheading the local church's outreach and service in the community. In that respect they would certainly be servants of the church and not just assistants to the priest. Building up social awareness and co-ordinating schemes for practical action (in conjunction with other community groups) should form a large part of any deacon's job description. This is a role on or beyond the boundaries of the church, and deacons should never become solely church focused.

A second issue is that of Selection. Ignatius insisted that "Deacons.. who are ministers of the mysteries of Jesus, should in all things be pleasing to men. For they are not mere servants with food and drink, but emissaries of God's church: hence they should guard themselves against anything deserving reproach, as they would against fire". (cf 1 Timothy 3: 8). Selection should probably be 'central', though with growing numbers of candidates that might become impracticable; but at the very least it should be 'Diocesan' or Regional rather than purely a matter of parochial recommendation. A new set of selection criteria is badly needed; and apart from obvious spiritual questions, candidates should have proven ability to work as members of a team.

Training should take place over a 3 year period - and for the most part could be given at a Diocesan level, rather in the same way as Reader training. For Chester Diocese, this would mean 'Foundations for Ministry' followed by two more specialised (and fairly practical) years. Spiritual formation and development is essential, but the trainers would need to avoid the temptation to produce 'quasi-priests'. The aim would be to enable candidates to develop an authentic servant ministry.

A fourth question is whether or not distinctive deacons should be ordained. The general consensus seems to be that they should; but also that they should be referred to with the title 'Deacon' rather than 'Reverend' and wear a badge or cross rather than 'clerical garb'. Part of their purpose is to symbolise the unity of the sacred and secular, but it needs to be clear that they do represent the church and have been given specific authority for this ministry. Priests meanwhile could be ordained priest straight away: - or, ideally, given a probationary year as at present but without being called deacons.

A fifth issue concerns Readers and the difference between Readership and the distinctive diaconate. Readers should be allowed to become the 'catechists' or 'teaching elders' they were originally designed to be without having their liturgical and preaching role broadened beyond recognition; and if anyone is ever authorised to preside at Communion in the absence of a priest it should be a Reader rather than a Deacon (so maintaining the important link between word and Sacrament). Readers should remain 'lay' people who can act as a major theological resource within parish, deanery and diocese, and who can bring their own experience in the world into their teaching ministry (and vice versa).

Finally, the difference (if any) between accredited lay workers and deacons needs to be clarified. In many ways, accredited lay workers are already 'distinctive deacons' - as too are many of our Parish Assistants. The restoration of a distinctive diaconate would help to resolve what is at present a fairly confused area of ministry.

The overall aim in restoring a distinctive diaconate would not be a literal reconstruction of the diaconate exactly as it was in the early church, but rather a renewed order which would encourage (rather than clericalise) lay ministry. It would also establish the three orders of ordained ministry as 'parts of a relational whole', equal but different and complementary, and reflecting the nature of our Trinitarian God.

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