

Discerning the Diaconate

This short paper is designed to help Vocations Advisers, DDOs and Bishops' Advisers in their discernment of candidates with a vocation to the distinctive diaconate. It surveys some of the current thinking about the diaconate within the Church of England, but it does not attempt to be the last word on the subject.

I. What is a Deacon?

In discerning a vocation to the diaconate, we need first to be clear what a deacon does and is. There are in particular three sources of reference which are helpful in this regard: the Ordinal in *Common Worship*; the report *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* produced by the Church of England's Faith and Order Advisory Group in 2007; and the report *The Distinctive Diaconate* produced by the Diocese of Salisbury in 2003.

The Ordinal

In the *Common Worship* Ordination of Deacons, the Bishop addresses the congregation in the following words:

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.

Deacons are to seek nourishment from the Scriptures; they are to study them with God's people that the whole Church may be equipped to live out the gospel in the world. They are to be faithful in prayer, expectant and watchful for the signs of God's presence, as he reveals his kingdom among us.

The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church

The report of the Church of England's Faith and Order Advisory Group *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* (2007) has this to say about the work and role of a deacon:

The first thing to say about deacons, in the light of the pivotal use of the terms *diakonia* and *diakonos* in the New Testament, especially by St Paul, is that deacons, in their ordination, receive the fundamental commissioning of Christ to be ministers (*diakonoi*) of the gospel. St Ignatius of Antioch calls them 'deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ' (cf. 1 Corinthians 4.1). They are sent by Christ, through the Church, as bearers of the Good News to the world and in this role (as the classic Anglican Ordinal of 1550/1662 particularly emphasizes) they have a special compassionate care for the needs of the sick, the lonely and the oppressed. Together with all Christians and all ministers, theirs is a life of compassionate service in obedience to Christ's command and example – service primarily of Christ and under his authority, secondarily of those who are Christ's and to whom he imparts his authority.

Deacons, like priests and bishops – and lay ministers too, for that matter – are related to the word, the sacraments and pastoral care: they receive the full ministry of the gospel. But they have an assisting, not a presiding role in relation to these three central tasks of the Church's mission. Deacons assist the priest and the bishop and carry out the duties deputed to them in relation to this mandate. They preach, teach and give instruction in the faith. They lead the people in

worship and assist in the celebration of the sacraments by bringing candidates, whom they have sought out and prepared, to baptism and (as the 1550/1662 Ordinal says), baptising them in the absence of the priest, and by assisting the president in the Eucharistic liturgy and leading the people in their participation.

Deacons are ministers of pastoral care on behalf of bishop and priest; they carry Christ's compassion to the forgotten corners of society and ensure that the needy receive practical help. Through their role in the liturgy, deacons bring the concerns and petitions of the wider community, within which they minister day by day, to the heart of the Church's worship, in order that these concerns may be laid upon the altar and placed at the foot of the cross (*Common Worship* spells out the role that it is appropriate for deacons to take at the Eucharist). Deacons can cross boundaries, from a parish base, into the 'fresh expressions' dimension of the mixed economy church. Deacons thus share in the apostolic ministry, being sent by Christ, through the Church as missionaries to carry forward his saving work.

This is an inward calling that may be discerned by the bishop and his advisers where a candidate has a calling and aptitude for a life-long ministry that is inextricably related to the word, the sacraments and pastoral care, but is suited more to an assisting than to a presiding role in relation to both the sacraments and the leadership of the community. The distinctive diaconate is particularly appropriate where an individual feels strongly drawn to the missionary, go-between ministry, seeking out the lost sheep and bringing both the message of the gospel and the practical care that goes with it to the unchurched and, therefore, may be reluctant to proceed to priesthood with its additional responsibilities and constraints. The distinctive diaconate appears to be suited to those with an evangelistic gift, provided this is clearly related to the three basic dimensions of ministry, tied into the liturgy and directed towards the full sacramental initiation of new converts. As those who cross boundaries, make connections and bring people together, deacons are well placed to move into the challenging new contexts, with their network relationships, of mission and evangelisation.

Drawing on the fresh interpretation of the New Testament language of *diakonia* and *diakonos* ... we can say that diaconal ministry, like all ministries, embodies God's saving purpose in the world, that is to say, becomes an agent of the kingdom of God. The deacon is invested with authority from Christ in his or her ordination. The deacon is not set apart for humble service any more than any other Christian, lay or ordained, and is not expected to exhibit humility more than anyone else! ... But a deacon is a person on a mission, a messenger or ambassador – making connections between liturgy and pastoral need, building bridges between the life of the Church and those who are not yet within it. The ministry of the deacon says something important about the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ and is indeed a sign of what the whole Church essentially is and is called to become more and more. Picking up the language of the House of Bishops' report on *Eucharistic Presidency* (1997), we can say that the diaconal ministry, like the ministry of the priest and the bishop, 'promotes, releases and clarifies' what is true of the Church as such. The ordination of a deacon may be regarded, therefore, as an ecclesial sign – a visible sign of what is true of the Church, of its essential calling, and is carried out in many ways by all the faithful and particularly by those who are called to a recognized ministry, lay as well as ordained. In ordination the deacon receives a distinctive identity from God through the Church. That identity relates to the kingdom or reign of God that has dawned upon the world in the mission of Jesus Christ, but remains to be fulfilled, and it points to the role of the Church in the coming of God's kingly reign.

The Distinctive Diaconate

The report *The Distinctive Diaconate* was produced by the Diocese of Salisbury in 2003. The report proposed an alternative way of describing the ministry of the deacon - focussing not so much on its content as on where it takes place. The report highlighted the following strands of diaconal ministry:

The deacon in the church:

- Has a non-presidential, representative ministry, representing Christ's own diaconal ministry
- Participates in the liturgy
- Proclaims the word of God and preaches where this is necessary or pastorally appropriate, recognising that some but not all deacons are gifted in preaching

- As a person with a ministry that is pastoral, catechetical and liturgical, helps to make connections for the children between their age-appropriate teaching and their inclusion in the liturgical life of the church
- Shares the participation of people for pastoral or liturgical rites, including baptism, confirmation and marriage and accompanies those concerned when they come to the church, sharing in the liturgy as appropriate, perhaps presenting them, or baptising them
- Has a prophetic role in drawing the church's attention to peace and justice issues that the church is overlooking
- Shares in the pastoral care of those who look to the church
- Brings and interprets the needs of the world to the church's worship and pastoral care
- Helps to order the church in administration, perhaps at a deanery rather than just a parochial level.

The deacon in the world:

- Is equipped to see Christ in the midst of the life of the world, whether locally or internationally
- Has a prophetic role in the world where need or injustice exist
- Brings the church's ministry of peace and justice to the world, either directly or by facilitating the ministry of others in the church
- Brings the pastoral ministry of the church to people in need, seeking out the lonely, the forgotten, the marginalised, the sick, those in trouble
- Makes the invisible ministry of the church visible
- Is the eyes and ears of the church in the local area

The deacon on the boundary:

- Is at the door of the church to greet people, particularly those encountered in ministry in the local area, helping them to cross the threshold into worship
- Is in the prophet's place on the edges and boundaries of society
- Is a two-way go-between or agent between church and world, straddling the boundary and helping others to cross it
- Brings the needs of the world over the boundary into church and interprets them in intercession
- Sends people out from worship into the world, in peace and for service
- Is a catalyst for Christian discipleship in the mission space between worship and the world

2. What is the Church looking for in Candidates for the Diaconate?

The *Criteria for Selection for Ordained Ministry* in the Church of England are applicable to candidates for both the diaconate and the priesthood. However, there are particular aspects of the Criteria that should be accentuated when a vocation to the diaconate is being discerned. The additional points to consider in assessing a candidate for the diaconate are taken from the report *The Distinctive Diaconate*.

A Vocation

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- the support of the local church, and perhaps wider community, for their vocation
- a strong sense of vocation to the ministry of the deacon, not a failed or thwarted sense of vocation somewhere else
- a sense of a life-calling from God, not a potentially passing desire to engage in the church's ministry

B Ministry within the Church of England

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- engagement with a servant ministry, a responsible behind the scenes person, able to be hidden, to get on with things out of the limelight, to oil the wheels
- Being comfortable occupying space on the boundaries, a liminal person who is at ease alongside people on the edges of the church and of society yet who is also secure and centred for themselves

C Spirituality

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- liturgical sensitivity and presence that enables others to worship, brings the needs of the world into worship and interprets them for the Christian community
- a rooted Christian spirituality, grounded in a life of prayer and immersion in God's word, attentive to God's presence in the world in its majesty and its misery
- a passion for God and for life, and a refusal to allow stagnation to set in, personally or in the Church

D Personality and Character

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- an attitude that reflects a vocation to be a servant without being a doormat
- sensitivity, expressed in an ability to listen and appropriate body language that welcomes others whilst respecting their space
- an outgoing, risk-taking, world-orientated perspective

E Relationships

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- evidence of ability to relate to people of different ages and social contexts
- an instinctive ability to get alongside people and speak their language
- pastoral skills that point to an ability to care for others appropriately

F Leadership and Collaboration

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- the ability and willingness to work in a team
- leadership gifts that reflect a willingness to be a leader who assists rather than always takes the lead, and does not unsettle or unseat others who have either long term or short term responsibilities
- a person who is capable of being a public representative person for the church, who is competent and comfortable in the public eye, whether in liturgy or the life of the world
- organisational gifts that equip and free others to do their work well

G Faith

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- communication skills that enable the person to preach the gospel in deed and in word
- teaching gifts, expressed in various and appropriate ways

H Mission and Evangelism

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- evidence of engagement with and in the local community, and awareness of what is happening in the wider world
- evidence of a life of service within and outside the Christian community

I Quality of Mind

Distinctive points to consider in assessing a candidate for the Diaconate:

- a quality of mind that reflects a thirst to know more of God and an ability to interpret what is known for others
- a creativity and imagination coupled with stability and common sense

Short Reading List

Avis, Paul, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (T&T Clark, 2005)

Brown, Rosalind, *Being a Deacon Today* (Canterbury Press 2005)

Collins, John N., *Deacons and the Church* (Gracewing, 2003)

For Such a Time as This (GS 1407, 2001)

'The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church' (GS Misc 854, 2007)