

# The Diaconate:



## Past & Future

Mary Ann Moman

For the last ten years The United Methodist Church has been engaged in conversations and often, disagreements about the identity and role of the permanent deacon. I have participated in many conversations during this time that have encouraged me to think more radically about both the deacon and elder. Although I will focus primarily on the deacon in this article, I will also reflect on the identity and role of the elder since the two orders are complementary. I am proposing that both orders have been “tamed” in our effort to clarify the difference between the two. Too often we have reduced the meaning of ordination to the functions fulfilled by each order. This has a limiting effect on our understanding of ordination and how ordination vows are fulfilled by both deacons and elders. Take for example a person who is called to teach in one of our institutions of higher education. It is possible, and it has happened, that this call could be fulfilled as either a deacon or an elder. Is this a wrong? I don’t think so. A call to a teaching ministry could, in fact, be the right response for both an elder and deacon. The role each order plays in the life of the church is complex. Many times roles will seem to collide and mix and yet the call to a particular order remains clear in the heart of the ordained.

John W. Wright, in a recent paper titled, “To Re-Present the

Triune God on behalf of the Church: Ministry (*Diakonia*) in Ignatius of Antioch,” states:

By shifting the understanding of ministry to service, political and economic interests outside the church co-opt ministry. Ministry becomes a reactive practice given to the church according to the already existent perceived needs in the society. Defined as service, a target audience determines which practices are conceived as ministry and which ones are not. Ministry becomes the name of an activity engaged in by Christians or the church in order to meet a “need” defined by political and economic forces outside the church. By contrast, I will argue that *diakonia* describes the activity of a go-between, a commissioned person who bodily re-presents an authority within a particular situation. In such an understanding, the one who sends determines what activities count as ministry. Ministry is defined by the origin of the activity those it represents, not by those who are to be the recipients of the activity.<sup>1</sup>

Wright goes on to build his argument that *diakonia* must represent the congregation as well as the nature of God in Christ. Deacons are not just helping people. Deacons represent for the church the presence and power of God in Christ. Deacons model for the church and the world lives that are grounded in sacrament and the love of God. This moves the deacon away from the private sphere of providing service to the public realm of living sacramentally (i.e., living out our baptism). Just as elders should never move into the mode of providing the “service” of worship for a specific congregation without helping members of the congregation live out their baptismal covenant in their daily lives, deacons should never retreat to understanding their identity as based in activities performed for those in need without helping the members of the congregation understand that their daily living is a reflection of their response to God’s call to justice and compassion for all people. Both deacons and elders are called to help the

baptized live the vows made at baptism. This is the radical nature of the call to ordained ministry.

Too often the identity of the deacon is linked with what a deacon does or does not do. "A deacon brings together the church and the world." "A deacon takes the sacrament of Holy Communion to the world and brings the world back to the church." "A deacon doesn't preside at the Eucharistic table or participate in the itinerancy." Although these statements are true, they are not adequate statements about the identity of a deacon. A deacon finds identity in who she or he is, not in what she or he does. Deacons represent the justice and compassion of God to the church and the world. Deacons live out the promises made at their baptism and in their ordination.

Ordination includes for both deacons and elders a prayer for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the ordinand for the office and work of the order. Every time I hear these words I am reminded that the Holy Spirit will not be contained in our limited understanding of ministry, and I am challenged again to remember that in my ordination I am sustained and challenged and I grow by the working of the Holy Spirit in my life and in the lives of those with whom I am in covenant. Ordination is not a private matter. It is not a decision about what I will do with my life. It is an affirmation of how I will live my life in relationship to God and the community. It is a public affirmation of a call from God and a covenant made to continue to grow in grace and to be perfected in love.

In ordination we are brought into the covenant of clergy. As full members of the annual conference, both deacons and elders are subject to the appointment process. This poses a significant problem for the church and for deacons. According to our polity, the deacon does not have a claim on the annual conference for an annual appointment. This significantly changes the understanding of full membership and makes deacons responsible for finding an appropriate appointment. Although in the Discipline it is clear that the bishop or district superintendent can initiate an appointment, I have not heard of many appointments initiated by the cabinet, particularly appointments beyond the local church. The initiation of an appointment on the part of the bishop and cabinet could increase the number of deacons who are in ministry in the marginal places of our annual conferences.

A lack of an appropriate support structure for deacons has caused many problems in the appointment system. The result has been that we have named the deacons as the problem, when, in fact, the system is not set up to support the appointment of deacons in places other than the congregation. For this reason it is difficult for some deacons to do the work that fulfills their call and also support themselves and their families. If this order is to truly be at the margins of society, there not only must be a way to provide support for living but there also must be a new look at the appointment process for deacons. The present system hasn't helped the church get deacons to the places where they are needed most. The statistics show that most deacons' primary appointment is to a congregation. It is much more difficult to negotiate a

ministry setting outside of the congregation. Part of the difficulty is in getting a setting approved. If the bishops and district superintendents were more involved in this process, we might find many more creative ways to appoint deacons. This increased involvement would also strengthen the covenant between the deacons and the annual conference.

Because we don't have a support structure in place, we can't appoint and send deacons to the places where they are needed most. After Katrina, The United Methodist Church could have deployed deacons to New Orleans and surrounding areas to set up community Sunday schools, provide medical care, offer legal support, and provide safe childcare. We have deacons who are trained in all of these areas. As a new church start is being planned a deacon could play a pivotal role in the community. If the order of

deacon is not to become one of "church professionals," we must address these issues of appointment, support, and accountability.

As I meet people who are in process to become permanent deacons, I am learning that more and more of them are looking beyond the congregation for employment that fulfills their calling. Many are creating their own ministry sites. A wonderful example of this is a doctor who has set up a medical clinic for those who don't have access to medical care. Many of the young people coming into the order are looking at serving in public arenas: city government, nonprofit agencies. These candidates for ordained ministry are looking to transform the world through systems already in place in our communities and helping the baptized to share in this ministry with them. In this way, deacons can become "go-betweens," doing ministry between the hope God has for the world and the realities of the world. It is my hope that we faithfully call and deploy deacons for ministry with creativity and imagination for the sake of the gospel. □

1. John W. Wright, "To Re-Present the Triune God on Behalf of the Church: Ministry (*Diakonia*) in Ignatius of Antioch" in *The Wise Shepherd: Biblical and Theological Resources for the Pastoral Task*, 63-78. Edited by Brad E. Kelle; Point Loma Nazarene University Monograph Series 6; Dan Diego: Point Loma Press, 2006

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**Q. 72 — Has the creation of the deacon as an ordained office of word and service complicated the ordination process?**

**Study of Ministry Report to 2008 General Conference**

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