



Challenges of the DEACON'S CALL

By Lynn Cross Kilbourne

Every spring, the rumor mill fires up. Our seminary hallways buzz with updates of appointments and guesses on who is going where. Upcoming graduates on the elder track in the United Methodist Church anxiously await word from their conferences about the charges to which they will be appointed. As each person gets her big news, she breathes a great sigh of relief and wastes no time in finding her new church's website and exploring it.

In the same classes and hallways are our colleagues on the deacon track. These faithful people are making calls, turning to their networks, and constantly having to explain their call to another staff parish relations committee.

"We have to convince the church that is where God wants us to be," explains Dr. Margaret Ann Crain, Professor of Christian Education and Director of Deacon Program and MA Degrees at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Since the 1996 General Conference decision to set apart deacons in a distinct order, men and women on the deacon track have been finding ministry positions suitable for their passions through a call system.

As exciting as diaconal ministry is for Rev. Elizabeth Bowes of Naperville, IL, she admitted the difficulties that came in finding a church in which to serve. She started looking for a

ministry position months before her May 2005 seminary graduation. Even with this early start, she did not find a position that allowed her to fully express her gifts until November 2005—a full year after starting her job search.

Bowes was surprised by the lack of support she found in her job search, explaining, "I had no help from clergy, no outside assistance from the church." This lack of support is especially disappointing to hear when compared to support given to those on the elder track. In her article, "The Promise of the UM Order of Deacon in the 21st Century: Partners with the Whole People of God," Crain emphasizes that "cabinets spend hours every year trying to find places of service for ineffective clergy." Effective deacons, however, lack even a minimal amount of support in the job search.

Financial Challenges

Just a year ago, discussions among elder and deacon candidates centered on debates over sacramental rights and itineracy. Now with economic fears abounding, the hot topic is the heightened degree of difficulty our deacons are having finding employment. Convincing a church that their ministry needs you has always been difficult, but it is now even more difficult since church budgets are being reduced across the nation.

Finances not only limit the church's ability to afford a deacon on staff, but also tighten their resources in ministry when a deacon is hired. Bowes was in a ministry with young adults at a 300 member congregation, but she was only able to have a part time position because the budget could not accommodate full time pay. She had to seek out another job on top of working at the church. Bowes also lamented that many churches that are financially able to hire a deacon would rather just have two elders as opposed to an elder and a deacon.

Many feeling called to be a deacon may be rethinking that decision when they are reminded of the security of guaranteed appointments, minimum salaries, and health benefits. In Crain's aforementioned article, she addresses the tensions between called clergy serving alongside itinerant clergy.

"Sometimes, some elders appear jealous of the deacon's freedom to seek out a place to serve." She goes on to say, "On the other hand, at times some deacons appear jealous of the security provided by an itinerate system."

But Crain emphasizes that finances are a bad reason to choose the elder track. The decision whether to become an elder or a deacon is ultimately a question of identity. Choosing the elder track for financial reasons will only blur the line between elder and deacon—the same concern many had in the argument over sacramental authority and itineracy.

It is very common for deacons to be offered jobs outside of their specialties—the areas of expertise that allow deacons to be a bridge between the church and the world. Bowes suggested, however, that accepting one of these positions is "not answering your call, [but rather] answering your financial situation."

A Unique Calling

In the midst of these circumstances, conferences and seminaries have the responsibility to inform congregations and future ministers about the identity and functions of our deacons. Even beyond this, we need to encourage those experiencing a call into ministry to prayerfully consider the deacon's order. Crain writes, "The continuing lack of basic understanding of the order of deacon and the continued call for denominational studies of ministry leave some deacons uncertain of their future."

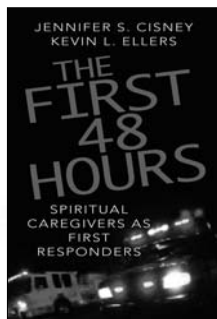
If fewer people choose to enter into the deacon's order, The United Methodist Church would lose something necessary to fulfilling its mission. Even though not all churches fully understand the differences in identity that exist between elders and deacons, our churches need the functions of its deacons. Deacons are on the cutting edge of connecting the church to the world. Their ministry bridges the gap between the local church and the world. □



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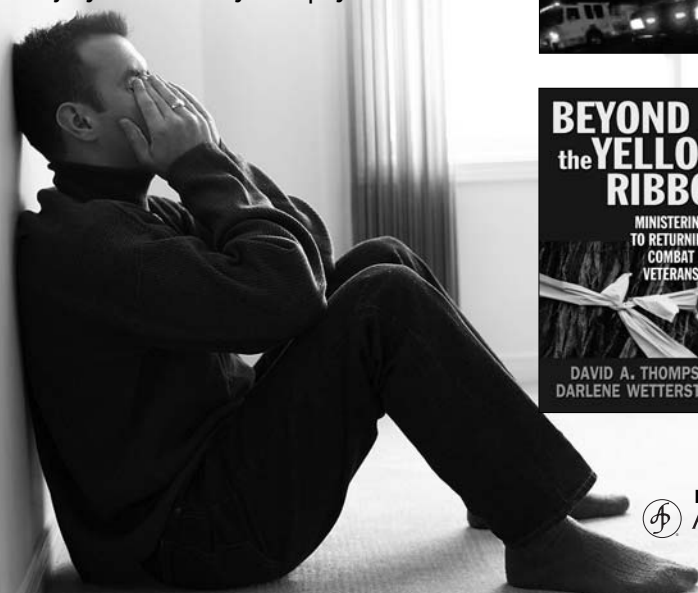


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