

Shaken By the Wind; Speaking with Boldness

I don't ever remember belonging to a church without deacons. I realize that is a rather uncommon experience but, even before the renewal of the diaconate in the Episcopal Church beginning in the 1970s and 80s, the church I grew up in (All Saints' Episcopal Church in Winter Park, Florida) had what was then known as a "perpetual deacon."

His name was John Bordley, he was an engineer, I believe, and worked in the defense industry in Central Florida. That was his "day job," but on Sunday mornings, there he was, fully vested, standing next to the priest at the altar for the Holy Eucharist. He assisted with the distribution of communion and I knew that he also took the Sacrament to the sick and shut-in of our parish and carried out certain other pastoral duties.

I knew that he was fully ordained, but that his vocation was to the diaconate, not to the priesthood and, although I probably thought of it as some kind of "assistant" to the priest, I knew that John was a gentle and holy man, deeply loved by the members of All Saints' and that he had a valuable ministry among us.

Years later, when I found myself in seminary preparing for ordination as an Episcopal priest, I found that I too would be ordained deacon, as a kind of stepping-stone to the priesthood. It was seen in those days as a sort of apprenticeship, but even then – in the early 1970s -- there was some discomfort with that notion because liturgical renewal and ministry development in the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, and across Anglicanism was beginning to rediscover the ancient roots of the diaconate and to see it as a "full and equal order" alongside, in our tradition, priests and bishops...and with the lay order which was already beginning to be seen as the most important "order," the order to which we all belonged by baptism – the *laos*, the holy people of God!

A revision of the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer came on the scene in 1979 and really revolutionized our church (and is still revolutionizing it) by emphasizing what many have called a "baptismal ecclesiology." Emphasizing baptism as the primary sacrament and a weekly celebration of the Eucharist as the norm, our "new" Prayer Book certainly set forth the diaconate as a ministry welcomed, and perhaps even expected, in every congregation.

After ordination, I returned to my home Diocese of Central Florida which was in the throes of a powerful wave of spiritual renewal sparked by the charismatic movement but linked also with liturgical renewal and the new-found respect for the ministry of all the baptized. Prayer groups and Bible studies were springing up everywhere and people were actually asking to be more involved in the life of the church and to take that life out into the world with them.

Our very wise bishop channeled all this energy into mostly helpful ways and the church saw growth in numbers and in depth. The bishop welcomed renewal in all its varied forms, but became particularly convinced that the diaconate was a much-neglected order in our church and deserved to regain its place as central to its life. We started something called “The Institute for Christian Studies” which was initially seen as a kind of lay academy, but soon developed a primary two-year track for the training and formation of those who were beginning to discern a call to the diaconate.

“The need for the Institute for Christian Studies in Central Florida pointed toward trends **all around the church**. It is essential to remember that the total ministry of the church, the centrality of baptism as both initiation rite and first call to ministry; and the Eucharist as the primary Sunday service, along with renewal movements and cultural shifts, was the context for the renewal of the diaconate” at least in our church. (*Unexpected Consequences*, Watson Epting, pages 32-33)

As a young priest, I taught New Testament in that school and was later named Dean, or Director, of the program in addition to my own day job as a parish priest. The program is still in existence and the Diocese of Central Florida remains one of our leading dioceses in the calling and deployment of deacons.

When I was elected Bishop of the Diocese of Iowa in 1988, there were two “permanent” or “vocational” deacons in the diocese. When I left – twelve years later – there were approximately forty! We had developed our own discernment and formation program and I was pleased to carry my early appreciation of the diaconate from the Deep South to a smaller, but vibrant, Midwestern diocese in which I was blessed to minister as bishop.

I begin with all this background because my experience and appreciation of the diaconate stretches now back some half century and while the ministry of deacon is a constant, the way it is carried out has evolved over time in our church in some interesting ways. My wife Susanne who is a deacon (I told you I love deacons, didn't I?) has actually written a book entitled *Unexpected Consequences: the Renewal of the Diaconate in the Episcopal Church*. In it, she traces some seven “waves” of diaconal development at least as we have experienced them in the Episcopal Church.

Building on the ancient order of deacon we see throughout church history beginning with those “proto-deacons” in the Acts of the Apostles, Susanne traces these sometimes overlapping stages of the modern diaconate in the Episcopal Church. We might even see these stages as the diaconate itself – in the words of your conference theme – “shaken by the wind(s)” of change. Let me summarize them (perhaps you will see yourself or at least some of your history in these stages):

1. In stage one, from the 1840s until the 1930s there were what we might call “missionary and indigenous” deacons like David Pendleton Oakerhater who ministered among the Cheyenne in Oklahoma from 1881-1931 after our church canons permitted men to be ordained deacon to serve in missionary and ethnic fields.
2. Stage two --1885 to 1970 -- would become an era of deaconesses. Modeled on the Lutheran experience in Germany where care was provided for children, those who were poor, the sick, and those in need of education during the Napoleonic Wars, the first canonical provision for women to be “set apart” (but not yet ordained) in our church occurred in 1889.
3. The third wave of diaconal development was the one I first experienced in the life and ministry of John Bordley with which I began this presentation. We called these men “perpetual” deacons, indicating that they were called to ordination as deacon for life, not merely as some kind of stepping-stone to the priesthood. They often served as sacramental and pastoral assistants for a growing church, but felt somewhat marooned as things changed in church and society in later years.
4. The fourth wave – from the 1970s through the 1980s – was a time of tremendous transition. Liturgical renewal set before the church a completely new vision of the diaconate, one that would require special study, many conferences, and considerable commentary. At the same time, the church had changed canon law in 1970 to allow women to be **ordained** to the diaconate. That meant that all deaconesses automatically became deacons, and women around the church could now become deacons. It must be said that some of these women chose to become deacons only because it would allow them to be ordained as priests more quickly once that became possible. In any case, this period of transition and redefinition included people with different understandings of the diaconate.
5. In stage five, it was clear (by the mid-1980s into the late 1990s) that the Episcopal Church was being re-shaped and renewed by immersion in the liturgies and theology of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The centrality of baptism and a fuller vision of the diaconate informed what came to be known as the “total ministry” of the church, the sense that all were called to ministry by virtue of baptism and that ministry flourished when it was carried out in a spirit of mutuality with lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons seen as icons of ministry for the whole church. Educational resources were called for so that deacons could educate themselves and the wider church about these developments.
6. From 1989 to 2009 and beyond, our deacons seemed to discover their interpretive and prophetic voice in the sixth wave. Deacons were often spoken of as being a bridge between the church and the world, but the question began to be asked, “Are we not also bridges between a church that seems stuck in old ways of doing things and a world

that has journeyed light years beyond the ‘establishmentarian mindset’ so prevalent among Anglicans not only in this country but around the world?” Training began to include learning how to facilitate dialogue and how to advocate, to ask questions about what deacons were seeing out there in the world, what the causes for some of the problems might be, and how to act systemically and not only in direct service.

7. If we are in the seventh stage now -- beginning from, say, 2005 – it might be said to be one of integration. In the last decade or so ecumenical breakthroughs (not least the full communion relationship between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and an intensification of our dialogue with the United Methodists) have helped us by providing theological reflection and statements on the diaconate, principles common to good diaconal formation, and new ways of understanding ministry assignments. The interpretive and prophetic role continues to develop with training in community organizing, preaching and teaching, and equipping the whole *laos*, the whole people of God, for their ministry of *diakonia*.

This last development, it seems to me, can come none too soon as we see ourselves in church and society – again in the words of your conference theme – “shaken by the wind” in so many, many ways. Continuing decline in membership of the mainline churches and a decreasing influence of those churches in U.S. and European culture comes at a time when the voice and witness of those very churches is most desperately needed.

Needed in the face of a rising tide of nationalism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, and unbridled greed. It is incumbent upon us, in the Episcopal Church at least, to remind our people that deacons are not actually mandated in the ordination service to “interpret the church to the world” but rather to “interpret the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world to the church.” Let me quote part of The Examination given by the ordaining bishop to the diaconal ordinand in our tradition:

“...In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, **particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely**. As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those **among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world...**At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ’s people that **in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.**” (Book of Common Prayer, page 543)

This understanding is certainly not limited to the Episcopal Church. In the United Methodist Church’s ordination service, a deacon is called “to interpret to the church the world’s hopes and hurts.” And in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s consecration service for

deaconesses and diaconal ministers, they are charged “to speak for the needs of God’s world to the church.”

And “there is something else we share in common,” my wife Susanne said in a 2006 lecture at an ecumenical gathering, “All of those rites are placed in the context of the assembly, and remind us that we are to be leaders in the midst of the whole *laos*. It reminds all those gathered that just as we believe in the priesthood of all believers we are part of the call to the ‘*diakonia* of all believers.’ It reminds us too that we are to provide leadership for the whole people of God who are called to ministry at baptism.”

In other words, all of us are beginning to understand *diakonia* in our day to include a major interpretive role. And, according to these ordination services, deacons (and those they teach and lead and form) are to ***interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely and to show those among whom they live and work and worship that in serving those who need help, they are serving Christ himself.***

I think this role and ministry is particularly vital in the face of those two examples of the church being “shaken by the wind” which I mentioned earlier: declining church membership and a rising tide of right-wing extremism which takes various forms today in the West.

In the tradition, the deacon is the one who dismisses the congregation at the conclusion of public worship with words such as “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.” In my experience, deacons have not only **sent** the gathered community into the world, but often **led** them there! And today, we do not only need to go into the world to serve the poor. We need to go into the world to find allies and colleagues we used to find alongside us in the pews.

It’s become almost trite to speak of those who describe themselves as being “spiritual, but not religious” and yet there are countless numbers of them out there. These are young -- and not-so-young -- people whose basic orientation and outlook may well have been formed or at least influenced by the church, but who find the institution you and I serve largely unresponsive to their needs and mired in traditional words and concepts they find off-putting at the very least.

They care deeply about “the needs, concerns, and hopes of the poor, the sick, and the lonely” and are sometimes hard at work “serving those who need help” yet they may, or may not, be aware that in serving those who need help, they are serving Christ himself. It is our job to help them make that connection – for their sakes and for ours.

Where do we find such people? Well, the ordination service says that we find them among those with whom we “live, and work, and worship.” They are our family members (partners and children and siblings and maybe even our parents). They are our co-workers and those we come across in the marketplace and the public square. And, yes, some of them may still be

alongside us in worship – on the one Sunday in four or five they still manage to make it to church, struggling with it all the way but still hoping to find something which speaks to them and to the rapidly changing world in which they live every day.

And our ministry of *diakonia* to them, and with them, is not so much to convince them to come back to church but to demonstrate that the church is committed to standing alongside them – wherever they are -- To learn from their perspective and their experiences (so different from many of ours), to listen to their stories, to support them in their journey to figure things out and to make a difference. And, then perhaps, when the time is right, to help them discover that the spirit which motivates their best efforts is the same Spirit which touched us at our baptism.

If we spend time with some of these honest seekers, we will likely find that they are as concerned as we are about the frightening and rising tide of ultra-right-wing extremism we see sweeping across the world today – in our politics and in our communities. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center:

“...the rise of right-wing hate groups is part of a decades-long trend tied to (this) country’s changing demographics. However, stoked by presidential campaign rhetoric and high-profile terrorist attacks, the number of groups specifically targeting Muslims nearly tripled last year, from 35 to 101...In its annual report on hate and extremist groups released (in February) the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 917 right wing extremist groups, compared to 467 in 1999. Hate went ‘main-stream’ in 2016, the report says.” (*Academics*, Duke University, February 23, 2017)

Perhaps, but as the report itself makes clear it has been building for some time, not only in the United States but in the U.K. and across much of Europe. And the hate is not undifferentiated and generalized but quite specific – Muslims, Jews and sometimes Christians, women, people of color, immigrants, and refugees fleeing persecution and even death in the lands of their birth.

As these groups become more visible and, in some cases, increasingly vocal, fear in the hearts and minds of the largely male, white establishment hardens into hate. The fear is of losing a privileged position, of losing a certain kind of identity, and most of all, a fear of losing control and the dominant seat at society’s table.

Dr. Kinnamon described this so helpfully in his address to you earlier in the conference as “an apparent nostalgia for an America that was predominantly white and Christian, which has led to unwarranted and mean-spirit fear of immigrants, refugees, Muslims and other minorities. For many people in **this** country, the mix of races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions is the nation’s greatest strength. For others, however, this is precisely what’s wrong about America. In a recent survey of US adults, more than half agreed with the statement, ‘I don’t identify with what America has become.’ It is evidence of a backlash against what many experience as rapid,

disorienting social change, a backlash that is often manifested in the language of fear.” (Michael Kinnamon’s address “Shaken by the Wind” to this conference, June 29, 2017)

This troubling global development is high among the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world which deacons must help interpret to the church – the needs of the refugee, the concerns of the undocumented immigrant, and the hopes of the least of these that this wall of hatred can be prevented from being built or at least dismantled before its cold stones harden.

Why is this essentially a diaconal role? Because deacons are ordained to pay attention to such matters! I used to say that it is the distinct ministry of a deacon to tug on the sleeve of the bishop or the priest or the congregation itself and continually ask the question, “But what about them? Who’s not in the room and at the table who should be? Why are these left out of our considerations?” That is still the case today. But the questions have ever so much more urgency.

As Deaconess Louise Williams wrote in a 2015 article in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, “...the diaconate exists to help the church better live out this call to *diakonia*. Sometimes those in the diaconate are ‘doers’ of that ministry. They do the actual ‘hands on’ work. At other times they are primarily ‘equippers,’ that is educators, facilitators, cheerleaders or evaluators for the diaconal work of the whole people of God. At still other times, they serve as living reminders that the Servant Christ calls the whole church to *diakonia*.” (Currents, July 2015, page 190)

I hope that deacons, and those they form and lead in the church’s *diakonia*, will increasingly see their primary ministry as incarnating themselves in our changing and often troubled communities, listening deeply to the voices of need and concern and yes sometimes hope, and being bold enough to try and interpret those voices in ways the church will be challenged to respond to. Do not be afraid, dear friends, to tug on the sleeve of those in authority in church and society and to demand that those voices be heard! It’s your ministry.

It is challenging and perhaps even risky ministry in the context of the world in which we find ourselves. A world which is increasingly frightened by, and suspicious of, “the other” – the one who looks different, speaks another language, has unfamiliar life experiences, worships in a different tradition (or not at all). But this vocation is nothing else but the proclamation of the kingdom of God which is the church’s essential role. The Realm of God looks like this! It looks like a community of diversity which finds its unity in the worship and service of the one, true God.

Nationalism, xenophobia, sexism, racism, and unbridled greed must be named for what they are – **sin**! Sin is that which falls short of the values of the gospel and which separates us from God’s purposes and impedes the in-breaking of the kingdom which Jesus came to inaugurate.

Deacons, and the church they serve, must be clear about this kind of sin, and willing to confront it whether it appears in the world **or** in the church.

That is indeed a challenging and risky vocation. But we must know that it is the vocation into which we were baptized. For we were baptized in the Name of the Triune God we heard about in our scriptural readings for today: the One who created this good earth out of the formless void and called it Good (Genesis 1:1-5); the One who is the mediator of a new covenant and a kingdom which cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:18-29) ; and the One who filled the apostles (after the house in which they prayed had been shaken by the wind!) so that they spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31)!

Pray for that boldness, beloved. The times we live in...cry out for it!

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