

A LOOK AT THE DIACONATE IN 2008

A SUMMARY

This summary addresses the nearly sixty pages of the study entitled, “Deacons and Their Ministries in The Episcopal Church as Reported by Deacons in 2008 and 1978.” As the first comprehensive survey in thirty years, we were blessed that the same researcher who conducted the studies from 1978-1985 was available to do this research in 2008.

Adair Lummis, PhD, researcher at Hartford Seminary brought historical insight, openness and clarity to this project. We hope that the North American Association for the Diaconate brought the insight that comes with the view of the big picture, primarily as a result of regional meetings, national conferences and a dedication to vocational development and life long learning.

The language of the summary is primarily lifted from the study itself. However, it is just that – a summary. The complete report, with all its nuances and insights, will provide additional valuable information. A few additional comments and the section on Conclusions are from the Director of the North American Association.

Dr. Lummis opens the report with a valuable insight: “For those who will become and are deacons, their ongoing integration of mission discernment, theological education, experiential learning and spiritual formation is vital.” That is where we begin.

Research on the Diaconate Thirty Years Ago

Thirty years ago when the number of deacons was under 600 in the US, bishops, ordained and lay leaders raised questions about whether the diaconate was sufficiently “distinctive” to support its expansion. . . . Notwithstanding, a strong majority of a special committee appointed to analyze studies of the diaconate and make recommendations to the House of Bishops, concluded there existed potential value in the diaconate as an order that would “live out more clearly the understanding of the Church as the servant (diaconal) people of God.”ⁱ

Accordingly in 1985 an evaluative research study of the diaconal programs in eight dioceses was completed. In reflection on the results for this report, Dr. Timothy Sedgwick concluded that. . . . “the successful recruitment and selection, education, placement and supervision and support of deacons is dependent upon a clear conception of the diaconate that is shared throughout a diocese.” This meant that there was still much to be done for the diaconate “to be an effective sacramental sign of our common ministry of servanthood in Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Research on the Diaconate in 2008

The number of deacons in the USA has increased from 600 in 1978 to over 2,600 in 2008. In 2008, “Proclaiming Education for All,” (PEALL) supported two surveys connected with the diaconate. In the spring of 2008, Deacon Susanne Watson Epting,

Executive Director of NAAD, Deacon John Willets, PhD, and researcher Adair Lummis, with the input of other members of NAAD and PEALL, developed two surveys.

The first or “school survey,” was an e-mail survey sent in early March to directors of diocesan schools/diaconal formation programs, who attended NAAD conferences. The second or the “deacons’ survey,” is a web survey. We were fortunate that survey questions and percentage responses are available for deacons surveyed thirty years ago. This report is primarily based on the results of the deacon’s survey in 2008, and secondarily on comparisons to deacons responding in 1978.

Personal Characteristics of Deacons Present and Past

- The increase in women is the most dramatic change in the personal characteristics of deacons currently, compared to those surveyed thirty years ago.
- There are proportionately fewer deacons now than earlier with salaried employment. This is possibly because in 2008 three-fifths of the deacons surveyed are age sixty or older.
- Although at least three-fourths of the deacons surveyed in both 1978 and 2008 had at least a two-year college degree, deacons in 2008 have garnered substantially more formal educational degrees.

Formation of Deacons

In 2008 as was true in 1978 the areas of education and skills for diaconal ordination are written into the Canons (Title III, Canon 6 currently). However, dioceses decide the appropriate way to carry out formation for aspiring deacons. Thus the values of diocesan leaders, the length of time the formation program has been in existence, as well as the contextual resources and restrictions of the dioceses affect the type of formation program available to deacons-in-formation.

Some dioceses have well established programs while others are relatively new, or are redesigning former programs. However, it is safe to say that formation for deacons is local and has always been. Within the next several months, NAAD will complete a project that brings forth the best of local formation.

Assessment of Educational Areas Taught

Coverage of the “classics,” or fundamental content areas (bible, theology, church history and tradition) in diaconal programs, both currently and thirty years ago, was assessed by a strong majority of those responding to the survey as at least “good.”

Around three-fourths of the deacons in both the 1978 and 2008 surveys, but particularly in 2008, assessed as “good” to “excellent” what they learned about the “theological understanding of the ministry of bishop, priest, deacon and laity and how these ministries are distinguished from and support one another.” At the same time, a number of deacons

indicated they wanted more academic depth with subjects taught at more of a graduate level than was available in their program.

Deacons were somewhat dissatisfied with the education they received in preaching and liturgy. While in the 2008 survey over three-fourths of current deacons rated their education as “good” to “excellent” in “understanding the role of the deacon in a variety of liturgical settings, and facility with the Book of Common Prayer, Hymnal and other resources,” several indicated that they needed more “hand-on” training in liturgy.

Deacons were generally satisfied with how they were prepared in caring for individuals, but felt that more attention could be given with how to work with the congregation and other community groups. Specifically they would have liked to have additional training in conflict management, working with volunteers, and group dynamics.

The quality of relationships with advisors, faculty and other students was also assessed. In general deacons were satisfied with those relationships, as well as with the opportunity for spiritual direction. In 1978 46% of those surveyed rated their social, intellectual and mutual support with other students as “good” to “excellent.” In 2008, however, 75% of deacons shared that assessment. This improvement may well be due to the underlined importance of community based learning, and opportunities for theological reflection with others in formation.

Note: Rather dramatically and in accord with the 1978-1985 vision of developing formation for a “new style” deacon, diaconal formation has improved greatly in providing “factual and conceptual background” in: world issues affecting the Church, particularly international problems of poverty and hunger; and contemporary social issues in the United States, particularly issues of race, class and gender. However, more education in these areas is desired by a number of deacons.

Overall Value of Education Received and Other Wanted

A key dynamic in any professional education is the extent to which the academic aspects of the program are integrated with practical training. While there is a marked improvement in this over 1978, two-fifth of the deacons responding in 2008 wish they had more assistance in integrating their book knowledge with learning how to carry out various diaconal ministries. In fact the survey does show that the most important factor in determining how useful deacons have found their education and whether they wish other areas or subjects had been offered, is the degree to which their program integrated academic and practical learning.

The Ordination Vows and Charges

Deacons surveyed in 2008 were asked: *How well did your diaconal formation program prepare you for fulfilling each of your ordination vows and charges?* About three-fourths of the deacons who responded indicated that they felt at least “quite well prepared.” At the same time, less than two fifths felt fully prepared on any of the five.

The charge for which more deacons feel they need more education than they received is being prepared “*to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.*” Deacons who felt well prepared were more apt to be those who had access to mentored practice or supervised field work. Further, the better the deacons perceived their formation program had integrated academic and practical work, the more positively they viewed their program for preparing them to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.

The second charge for which deacons were somewhat more likely to have wanted more in their programs being prepared to: “*Study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them and to model your life upon them.*”

Deacons seem to have formed their assessments on how well they were prepared to meet the other charges more variously through components of their formation programs. Educational programs are not the only ways deacons become fully prepared to fulfill their ordination vows. Life experience and experience as a deacon can also contribute to that preparation.

Diaconal Deployment and Ministries

After ordination most deacons are assigned either to their home parish (57%) or to another parish. The way bishops assign deacons can vary widely from diocese to diocese. Over four-fifths (86%) of deacons responding in 1978 were appointed to a congregation. Two-thirds (67%) were assigned to congregations in 2008. The longer study contains a close analysis of how many hours per week deacons serve.

On the whole deacons now share responsibilities inside the church walls in about the same way as deacons in 1978. About two-fifths preach and attend Vestry meetings; about a third are engaged in crisis and bereavement ministry in the parish; slightly under a third taught adult classes or led bible studies. Few deacons in either year did anything with youth.

In terms of outreach ministries, however, deacons in 2008 are far more active than 1978. The statistical information in the report is quite dramatic in illustrating this change. Advancing “mutual ministry” and enabling lay ministry has been strongly affirmed as a central role of the deacon since the 1970’s.

Complementary Roles: Liturgical Duties and Lay Ministry Development

Most deacons were quite positive about how accepted deacons and their ministries are in their dioceses. The great majority (90%) perceived that it is at least “somewhat” the case that congregations in their dioceses hoped to have a deacon assigned.

More deacons, however, perceive that deacons “frequently” exercise their full liturgical roles more than they perceive that they are “frequently” engaged in lay ministry

development. While the canons now suggest that deacons oversee the training of Eucharistic Ministers and Visitors, it is unclear how many are engaged in this work.

Continuing Education

A characteristic of quality deacon formation programs, as described by NAAD is that the program is: *“Oriented toward life-long learning. The program authenticates that learning is ongoing and provides the learner with the foundation and resources for life-long learning. The learner understand the program as simply one stage along the learning spectrum and is able to set learning goals and prepare learning plans beyond the prescribed program.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

Using this criterion, it would seem that deacon formation programs now are better than those in 1978, since about three-fifths of the deacons in 2008 (compared to two-fifths in 1978) have taken further courses since ordination. Fully two-thirds of deacons responding in 2008 have engaged in some type of continuing education (not necessarily course work). Popular areas are workshops and learning experiences in;

- Pastoral care and counseling
- Congregational spiritual and interfaith/interpersonal growth
- Congregational ministries for specific groups of leaders or members
- Understanding and addressing social issues
- Specific workshops for deacons through NAAD meetings and conferences

A little less than half the deacons surveyed in 2008 have a learning plan for the coming year. Personal characteristics have some relationship with their interest in continuing education. Younger deacons (those under sixty) are somewhat more likely to have engaged in continuing education over the last year, and female deacons are somewhat more likely to have thought about or settled on a learning plan for the coming year.

Another factor important in whether deacons engage in continuing education is whether there are any parish or diocesan funds made available to them.

Financing Diaconal Ministries

The great majority of deacons volunteer their time in carrying out diaconal ministries. However there are often expenses associated with these ministries. Less than half of the deacons surveyed, both in 1978 and 2008, are reimbursed for travel or other expenses incurred in their diaconal work. There were clear comments by respondents to indicate their concern about this situation. They are clear that being a deacon is sometimes a real financial hardship, especially for those in young families or on fixed incomes.

The practice of providing a discretionary fund has expanded over the last thirty years.

Indeed NAAD will continue its work in advocating for fairness in reimbursing expenses, and establishing realistic expectations in the commitment of time. This is particularly

important since deacons most often must take time off work for special church events, clergy conferences and any continuing education experiences.

The amount of money that might be a part of a stipend paid to the deacon seems less important to many than the fact that stipended ministers are more valued. Deacons are also concerned about the impact on recruitment of young people as evidenced in the comments below:

- *If I could hope for anything, it would be a paid diaconate that was taken from the diocesan asking and paid by the diocese to the deacon. I fear we are building an order that is open only to those who are financially well off...*
- *Develop a model for combining the diaconate with part time employment and make it known – to encourage diaconal vocations...among younger people and marginalized communities.*
- *If we want to attract young, energetic deacons, we must begin to pay them...many do not realize that deacons are not paid and need to have a “real job” to keep food on the table.*

Deacons’ Membership in Wider Church Associations

Deacons, like individuals and professional in any specialty, may gain from associations with national groups from which they can get resources, advice, and form networks. Among the deacons surveyed in 2003, 43% were registered with the Church Pension Group, although less than 18% were registered with the Church Deployment Office.

A majority or about three-fifths (62%) of the deacons responding in 2008 are NAAD members. NAAD members are somewhat more likely than other deacons to put in more hours in diaconal work, have a discretionary fund, and get more money from their dioceses and congregations for continuing education. They are also more likely to attend meetings of diocesan committees or commissions.

Diocesan Involvement

In a different PEALL survey of Commission on Ministry chairs, it is noteworthy that the greatest change over thirty years is the importance of having at least one COM member be a deacon. In that survey having a deacon was either a formal or informal criterion for the makeup of the COM in 88% of the respondents (compared to 12% in 1978).

When asked about suggestions they would like to make to Commissions on Ministry, deacons suggested:

- That dioceses take care to include deacons in the design of formation programs
- That additional teaching about the diaconate remains important, particularly with presbyters, who may or may not have learned about or worked with a deacon

Deacons urge that their dioceses provide voice and vote in diocesan conventions, committees and commissions. In a survey conducted by the North American

Association, we know that there are very, very few dioceses that do not allow this. While not in violation of, neither is this consistent with the national constitution and canons.

A Distinctive Order

In suggesting specific steps that the Church might take to strengthen the ministry of deacons, there were innumerable comments and suggestions. One request made by over fifty deacons is that church-wide standards be set for diaconal formation. Several indicated that canonical changes and strengthening canonical mandates is essential.

The North American Association is currently working, with the assistance of a grant and co-sponsorship of the former Office for Ministry Development, to identify deacon formation that works; to articulate the principles and values of those programs; and to share those best practices with the larger church. The Association believes that local formation can indeed be a gift to the church, allowing for the needs of those in formation, and the local context.

While deacons are now typically referred to as deacons rather than “permanent” or “vocational” deacons, one longstanding obstacle perceived by many to being considered a distinctive order is the fact that priests are ordained to the transitional diaconate.

Deacons strongly aver “The Church should have a vital diaconate.” They also advocate that there needs to be church-wide attention to and publicity for the diaconate, including news stories that more often feature deacons and diaconal ministry; liturgical customaries; access to buying in to insurance plans, etc.

Some Conclusions

It is clear from the study that in renewing this historic order, particularly as described in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the hopes of the study committee in 1978 have been addressed. The vast majority of deacons are outwardly focused and mission minded. In cases where deacons tend to be more liturgically and pastorally focused we see the tensions between what we call the “Third” and “Fourth” Waves of the Diaconate in the 20th and 21st centuries. After World War II, the “Third Wave” of Deacons were recruited for assistance, primarily with liturgy and pastoral care, in a church that was in the midst of a post-war boom. With the revision in the Book of Common Prayers, however, returning to a more historic interpretation of the diaconate, more similar to the early church, we saw a shift in the expectations of those called to be deacons. There is no question that those in the “Third Wave,” served faithfully and well, fulfilling what the Church asked of them at the time.

With the revision in the Prayer Book came new understandings. For all of us. With a focus more on baptismal identity, new collaborations and partnerships in carrying out the mission and ministry of the Church are encouraged. That is one of the reasons that the North American Association encourages the use of the Baptismal Covenant and the Ordination vows and charges to assess our ministries and learning plans each year. We

would, in fact, advocate that our annual parish meetings include a major report booklet on how each person in the congregation has done in fulfilling their baptismal promises each year, rather than only the business and accomplishments of committees and commissions.

We were not surprised to learn that the ordination charge for which deacons felt least prepared was “*To interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.*” In the decades of gatherings and discussion among deacons, this has been clear. That is why we have begun to define skill sets associated with this charge and are urging those in leadership to incorporate new components in formation programs. It is important to note that this is also the charge for which the Church is least prepared – and it is our hope that deacons will share new found skills in this area in order to expand meaningful and compassionate mission initiatives.

It is also not surprising that deacons have a clear understanding of the ministry of bishop, priest, deacon and laity and how these ministries are distinguished from and support one another. Because the renewal of this order occurred with the most recent revision of the BCP, most deacons are grounded in that understanding. For those (of all orders) whose primary formation took place with the 1928 version of the BCP, there are often different understandings (of all the orders).

There has been a four-fold increase in the number of deacons since 1978. Ordinations are ongoing in a majority of dioceses. It is tremendously important for congregations and dioceses to realize what it means for their own identity every time a deacon is ordained. This study is, after all, a commentary on the Church herself as much as it is on the diaconate. And it is our prayer that we will continue to grow and serve in the ways the Church we love has asked.

Susanne Watson Epting, Deacon
Director, North American Association for the Diaconate
March 2009

ⁱ Committee on the Diaconate (The Rt. Rev. Elliott Sorge, Chair), “The Future of the Diaconate: Recommendations to the House of Bishops” in *The Church, the Diaconate, the Future*, the Report of the Diaconate, submitted by the Council for the Development of Ministry to the House of Bishops, The General Convention, September 1979, Denver, Colorado. Quote Part III, p.1.

ⁱⁱ

Sedgwick identified the “need to have a coherently developed theology of diaconal ministry that is *shared by the diocese as a whole*. Such a theology moreover needs to include a clear description of what a deacon is and is to do. The report... (notes) five roles of the deacon as (1) a symbol of servant ministry, (2) someone committed to the development and execution of a ministry; (3) a liturgist and in most situations a preacher, (4) an authorized leader in the Church, (5) an enabler of lay ministry. These roles may indeed complement each other; however, they more accurately reflect a range of expectation that are too often taken for granted as complementary when in fact they reflect significant tensions between fundamentally different concepts of ministry and the diaconate that is unresolved.” See Timothy Sedgwick, p.3, “Foreword;” in *Raising Up Servant Ministry*, op.cit, (1985).

ⁱⁱⁱ From the work of the 2008 Constable Grant Committee on Deacon Formation Programs that work.