

## **The distinctive diaconate in the Diocese of Sheffield: discerning and encouraging vocations**

### **Aims**

The aim of this document is to affirm and encourage the discernment of vocations to the distinctive diaconate in the Diocese of Sheffield, and to help inform the DDO team and others in that work. Although some dioceses in the Church of England have many years' experience of the ministry of distinctive deacons, the overall numbers are small, and the distinctive diaconate is less clearly recognised in the Church of England than in some other traditions. Sheffield has never had distinctive deacons, and the Bishops hope that we can encourage this ministry as part of the existing moves towards a more mixed economy ministry, both lay and ordained. Distinctive deacons in the diocese would be self supporting, which follows the lead of most other dioceses who have experience of developing this aspect of the Church's ministry.

### **History**

Historically, the diaconate was always a distinct but diverse order with its own dignity and identity. Acts 6:1-6:

1 Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

2 And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

3 Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, 4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

5 What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

- has traditionally been interpreted as the foundational text for the ministry of deacons and conceptualised as menial service. However, this approach has been challenged by John Collins, an Australian Roman Catholic theologian, who has explored the *diakon* word group in the Greek, and concludes that it more often connotes commissioned agency than menial service – so in

Philippians 1:1:

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

and 1 Timothy 3:1-13:

- 1 The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task.
- 2 Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher,
- 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money.
- 4 He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way--
- 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church?
- 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.
- 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.
- 8 Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money;
- 9 they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
- 10 And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons.
- 11 Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.
- 12 Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their households well;
- 13 for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century though, the diaconate had become a transitional stage towards priesthood, and this remained very much the pattern, despite sporadic efforts to revive the Order as a calling in its own right. In seeking to nurture the recovery of the distinctive diaconate in the Church of England we should be trying not to restore the Order in its historical form, but rather to encourage a creative and dynamic conception of the diaconate for the future. However, enduring principles of embodying the inclusive love of Christ, drawing sacred and secular together, and challenging the Church by reaching into areas where it may not wish to be, remain.

### **Emerging theology**

The theological model for the diaconate continues to be a matter of debate but has focussed on the self-emptying love of Christ. As Karl Rahner put it at the Washington DC United States conference of Catholic bishops in 1993, 'Today what is properly in question is not a restoration of the diaconate in its ancient form but a creative conception of the diaconate of the future.' The nature of a distinctive diaconal identity is founded (as it is for the whole Church) on the imitation of Christ, exemplified in Philippians 2:1-11:

- 1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,
- 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  
4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.  
5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,  
8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.  
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,  
10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Thus diaconal ministry is not confined to caring service, but crucially, doing what God requires (Micah 6:8). It is important to distinguish the rationale of distinctive deacons from that of priesthood (and lay ministers). The threefold structure of ministry is significant not in what ministers *do*, but in what they represent in terms of being, and deacons have a specific role in supporting and reminding the Church of its goals, mission and servanthood. Deacons are to embody Christ's servant calling, and to be the focus in creating a clearer, sharper image of Christ's own ministry, and of the Church itself as a sacramental sign of God's redemptive mission at work in the world.

While the principle focus of diaconal ministry is not liturgical, its traditional role at the Eucharist serves to embody and display the link between the altar and the community: the deacon's role includes proclaiming the gospel; inviting the faithful to prayer; and dismissing them into the world.

Within the ministries of the Church, deacons sit between pioneer ministers on the one hand and readers on the other. Readers work largely within the church, preaching, teaching, leading worship and some pastoral work, for example, taking funerals. Deacons do preach but it is not central to their ministry. They work largely outside the church, beyond the known gathered, making connections, especially with those on the edge of society, enabling, equipping, encouraging and facilitating others. They are people with a heart for justice. The deacon's spirituality can be summed up as offering hospitality to the stranger – something which the people of God in the Old Testament were commanded to do (eg Gen 18:108, Lev 19:34, Prov 31:20). They are liminal people standing on the boundary between church and the wider community and making connections between the two. They have a leadership role of oversight in community development, not simply as an assistant to the priest.

### **Where we are now**

There has tended to be an emphasis on what a deacon 'can't do', rather than what he or she is called by God to be. Within the Church of England, the (so

far, limited) renewal of the diaconal movement is set within the context of the increase in lay and collaborative ministry, and the reduction in numbers of priests. Ministry Division recognises that while the criteria for selection for ministry in the Church of England apply to candidates for both the diaconate and the priesthood, there are also particular aspects of the criteria that should be accentuated in discerning a vocation to the diaconate.

Liz Carrington, a deacon in the Diocese of York, writes: ' Deacons are those individuals who have been recognised by the church as having a charism for a lifelong commitment to a public, representative, enabling servant ministry which connects with those on the edge of society and within the church, and which is characterised as caring, missional, prophetic and transformative.'

### **Spotting Vocation**

In practice, prospective distinctive deacons will have significant prior involvement either in people-facing professions, prior theological study at degree level or longstanding liturgical or other experience of service in church life which are seen as defining part of their path to the diaconate.

Commitment to activities outside the church may include community service, volunteering with charities, being a voluntary chaplain and befriending/praying for people.

Prospective deacons are likely to fall into one of two categories: restless readers and straightforward enquirers. Neither group may be able to say exactly what it is they are looking for unless they know a deacon.

Restless readers sense a call to something they can't put a name to - not priesthood, not readership. This can be difficult to articulate, partly because they may not have seen the diaconate modelled, yet being a reader 'doesn't fit.' They may express a desire to be out in the community, as the place where mission needs to happen.

Paying close attention to the additional points for discerning a call to the diaconate in Ministry Division's 'What is the Church looking for in candidates for the diaconate?' may be of significant help here.

### **Training**

Because there are comparatively very few distinctive deacons, it is recognised that mentoring is a valuable part of the process of discernment, through training and formation.

Since at present there are no distinctive deacons in the Diocese of Sheffield, it will be important to liaise closely with YMC and other courses, as vocations arise. Existing deacons elsewhere sometimes express their sense of being sidelined in training, because courses are not geared to the formation of someone who is not called to priesthood following the one year's diaconal year.

### **References and Further reading**

Church of England: Ministry Division – *What is the Church looking for in candidates for the diaconate?*

DACE (Diaconal Association of the Church of England)

Carrington, Liz: *A Survey of Good Practice in Diaconal Formation in Ecumenical Perspective*, MA dissertation, Sheffield 2014

Collins, John: *Diakonia, re-interpreting the ancient sources* (Oxford: OUP 1990)

Croft, Steven: *Ministry in three dimensions: ordination and leadership in the local church* (London, DLT 2008)