

# Seeing the Deacon in Our Midst

## *An Aid for the Discerning Community*



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*“I am convinced that there are at least two deacons in every congregation who do not yet know that they are called to this. It is the delightful and diligent task of all the people to look for them and call them by name.”*

*Roderick B. Dugliss, Dean  
The School for Deacons*

### **What about discernment?**

For many years, it has been the practice of the Episcopal Church to rely on self-nomination to identify those who are called to ordained roles. We are used to waiting for someone to say, “I think God is calling me to be a deacon.”

*A Note about  
Discernment:  
The individual  
and the  
community*

Today we are seeking more and more for the community of faith to be the initiator of this process. We hope that communities will continually look around to see if there is a prospective deacon in their midst and to begin to ask that person, “Do you think you might be called. . .?” This isn’t either/or since God is not limited to acting just through individuals or only through congregations. A person’s own sense of call needs to be honored, but most importantly, it needs to be seen, corroborated, and affirmed by others in the community of faith and in the wider church. In the same way, the perceptions of the people about a prospective deacon need to be sensed, prayed into, and owned by the individual. Discernment is an ever-present, on-going process and dimension of the gathered people of God.

### **How do we discern?**

This brochure seeks to help us, as people of faith, undertake this essential responsibility. It lays out some basic understandings, resources, and processes for looking for deacons in our congregations.

You can use this brochure individually or as a resource in and for your congregation as it seeks to become what the ministry canons envision – a discerning community.

### **What assumptions do we start with?**

*That –*  
All Christian ministry arises out of Baptism, spelled out in the Baptismal Covenant.

Gifts for ministry are lavished on us by the Holy Spirit to be used for the good, the reconciliation, of all people to God in Christ. Everyone is called to be holy, to make Jesus Christ and his loving Good News known, to nurture one another, to serve, to own and promote the vision of the Holy Reign of God, and to build up the Body of Christ. Some are called to provide leadership and guidance to help all of us claim and live out our call.

The Diaconate is a full and equal order of ministry in the church with distinct responsibilities and leadership roles.

*We are called to active discernment –*  
The ministry canons [Title III] adopted at the 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. at Minneapolis, MN in August of 2003 charge all people and congregations of the church to make an active, on-going effort to discern, call out, and support the formation of persons for all kinds of ministry in the church, including deacons.

### **What are the first steps?**

- Learn about the Diaconate –*
- 1) Read the section of “an Outline of the Faith commonly called the Catechism” on The Ministry. [[Book of Common Prayer](#), pp. 855-856]
  - 2) Review your Baptismal Covenant. [[Book of Common Prayer](#), pp. 304-305]
  - 3) Read The Examination in the Rite for the Ordination of a Deacon [[Book of Common Prayer](#), p. 543]

4) Read the national church Title II Canons, particularly Number 6, “The Ordination of Deacons” and Number 7, “The Life and Ministry of Deacons.” You can most readily get this text from the Episcopal Church website, [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org).

5) Read Dr. Thomas Ferguson’s essay, “Lifting Up the Servants of God.” You can find it at the School for Deacons website, [www.sfd.edu](http://www.sfd.edu).

6) Talk to two or more deacons. Diaconal ministry has varied enough expressions that you need to hear from several perspectives.

#### **For more background.**

*Read the standard texts –*

Ormonde Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*. (Cowley Press) This is readable, clear, and well researched.

James Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*. (Trinity Press) More history, more scholarly, with a lot of detail.

John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making the Connections between New and Old*. (Morehouse Publishing) This book draws on a body of work Collins has done in probing the fuller meaning of the Greek words with the stem *diakon* – of which *diakonia*, traditionally translated as “service” is a key one. Collins looks at the secular as well as the sacred uses of the language in the early Church and recovers for us a dimension of diaconal ministry that is “agency,” intermediation, and advocacy.

#### **How do we begin to look?**

When you begin looking for the deacon in the midst of your congregation it is very important to note that you will not see persons fully formed and realized as deacons. An intentional experience of formation and development will be an essential ingredient of

the process persons will go through in order to fulfill the promise of the deacon within them and to be ready to be ordained. Study and work at the School for Deacons is essential in that formation and development.

You are looking for inclinations toward diaconal ministry and the potential an individual has to become an ordained deacon in the church.

Bear in mind that the potential deacon is an active participant in the life of the parish, one who is regular in weekly worship, and in “working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.” [Constitution & Canons, I.17.Sec.3]

Once you have done the background work, several images or metaphors for the deacon can help you.

*You should look for –*

#### **The Deacon as Servant**

This is not one who is servile! It is servant-hood as proclaimed by Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve.” This is servant-hood modeled by Jesus who took a towel and washed the feet of those he challenged to follow him. The Deacon as servant reaches out help the other.

#### **The Deacon as Servant Leader**

We are all called to “seek and serve Christ in all person, loving neighbor as self.” Deacons have the willingness, skills, and ability to guide, direct, coax, and coach all of us in both seeking-seeing Christ where we may not want to, and may not be able to – and serving. Deacons don’t – and can’t – do it all themselves. They lead us all so that the world is served in Christ and in the name of Christ.

#### **The Deacon as Icon of Service**

Deacons have a limited yet powerful function in liturgy and in the life of the congregation to act out, model, show in a symbolic way the concrete ministry of service in action. We are to look for people who can play this liturgical role with confidence, competence, and in an inspiring way. We expect them to stand in the doorway both to dismiss us “to do the work God has given us to do” and to show us the way.

#### **The Deacon as Animator**

We look for people who can cajole, inspire, invite, support, encourage, celebrate, and sustain the impulses to ministry in and of all people in the congregation.

#### **The Deacon as Intermediary**

We look for people who can and do speak up for those who have no voice or go unheard. We look for people who can articulate the Good News both to us in the faith community and to those with whom we seek to ally outside the church, to engage in compassionate action and ministries of justice.

#### **The Deacon as Entrepreneur**

We look for people who can see an unmet need in a hurting and unjust world and can marshal the wills and resources to start up a ministry of the people in response to it. These are people who can initiate, innovate, and then let go – to leave the people to carry on, grow into, and expand what was started.

#### **The Deacon as Prophet**

The ministry of deacons is of compassion and justice. The prophet sees the gap between what is and what God wishes for us and can articulate it and draw others to it. The prophetic deacon is not strident, partisan, offensive, but rather compassionate, clear, and insistent. We look for people who can see and

can speak about Good News as reconciliation, recompense, and restoration.

#### **The Deacon in Liturgy**

Deacons play a distinctive and active role in the Eucharistic liturgy of the church. Each dimension of that role links to or expresses an element of *diakonia* as a reminder and an inspiration to the gathered congregation. Therefore, we look for persons who are, or will become, confident, comfortable, and exemplary when serving liturgically, so that they feel it is an authentic place for them.

It is important to remember that in all of this discernment we are looking for signs and hints of possibility, not perfected saints. No one deacon will embody all of these traits.

### **HEART OF A DEACON**

*Qualifications of prospective deacons –*

- ❖ You must be a member of a congregation in the diocese.
- ❖ You must show evidence of diaconal gifts, already lead people in diaconal ministry, and have a clear sense of diaconal vocation as the guiding principle of your life.

#### **We look for Baptized persons who are**

- Disciple Formed
- Gospel Centered
- Mission Driven

#### **And who passionately**

- Find Christ in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned
- Lead Christian people in loving care of the poor, sick, lonely, and needy
- Defend those who have no helper

*[Special thanks to the deacons of the diocese of Louisiana for these words]*