

“Exploring the role of the diaconate” (Spring 2012) Province, journal of Credo Cymru –
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“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Philippians 1:1).

The essential role of the deacon is to serve – today, as for many centuries, mainly as an apprentice presbyter, for the transitional diaconate is the predominant form. The vocational deacon, once found in large numbers in the church, for long all but extinct, is now however undergoing something of a revival, especially in parts of the Roman Catholic Church. This latter is particularly because, unlike the priest, the deacon can be a married man. The shortage of priests, and their increasing age, and new ecclesiological concepts, have encouraged the revival of the order – and there is no doubt that this has had enormously beneficial results.

However, while useful as an expedient, the role of the deacon, other than as a stage in training prior to ordination as a priest, is, I believe, less than fully developed in the Anglican Communion than elsewhere in the Universal Church. If the deacon is seen predominantly, if not solely, as a “trainee priest”, then much is lost, and his or her ministry may suffer as a consequence.

One illustration may suffice show what I mean. One of my colleagues on the Diocesan Training Programme in the Diocese of Auckland (where I commenced training in 2009) was ordained as a deacon before the training even began, on the basis of his ten years’ experience as a youth pastor – though it might be questioned whether he met the minimum canonical requirements of learning, since he had no formal training in theology.

In my talks with him, it was clear that he saw his ministry as predominantly continuing along the same path it had been going; as a youth pastor in a large strongly evangelical parish, preaching the Word of God, ministering to his people, and leading services. He was beginning to suspect that his calling was to the order of deacons, and not to that of priest. But the diocese only had a handful of permanent deacons. Several others had ultimately become priests. Only one seemed settled in his vocation as a deacon – and he was fulfilling the role he had assumed while a layman, running the city mission, and only occasionally participating in what might be termed “regular” parochial services.

My friend has now been ordained a priest, but I feel that this was perhaps devaluing the role of the deacon. The problem was that the diocese, and the province as a whole, had no clear support provision for any deacons they might appoint, and those appointed felt isolated and unsupported, with no clear role. In part this was a difficulty not found in the Church in Wales – or that of England – for here the lay reader could perform many of the functions of the deacon. Perhaps most importantly, they had no clear concept of the role of the deacon, other than as a transitional stage.

The answer, for me, was plain enough. In the discernment process it ought to be clear whether someone were being called to the permanent diaconate – those for whom service,

rather than leadership, pastoral care, rather than presiding over the Eucharist, were paramount. Once discerned, they needed to be nurtured, and helped to understand their calling to that ministry, rather than to that of priest – or lay person for that matter. They should, as anciently, be responsible directly to the bishop, who could then assign them as needed throughout the diocese.

Since they were not “trainee priests” (for want of a better description), they should not be used as a deacon might, assisting in a placement parish. Rather, under the supervision of an archdeacon (again, as was anciently the practice), they should have specific roles to play, as, for instance, ship visitor, city missionary, or rural missionary – the latter something well worth developing in Wales. As permanent deacons they have a serving role more than a liturgical role, and in so doing they help to bring the light and the truth of God to those who might not otherwise be reached.

There has since been some work towards reviving the office of deacon, for both men and women, but the main difficulty has often been a lack of understanding of the role and office in the parishes. This is a pity, but doubtless time will either see a stronger diaconate, or it will decline once more to a merely transitional stage in priestly formation. The shortage of priests in much of the western church would suggest that there might be place for more permanent deacons.

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