

**Annual Gathering of Deacons
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“The diaconate in 2030:
What might it look like and how do we get there?”

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Let me begin with a question so obvious and so general we might forget to ask it or overlook its significance: why are we having this conversation? In part because the question was not and would not have been answered, let alone asked, until relatively recently. From the time of the Reformation to perhaps the early 1990s, the Anglican view of the diaconate was uncomplicated: it was a transitional – better termed a training and probationary order – for those who were always destined to become priests. While there were those who professed and promoted other views of the diaconate before the 1990s, the prevailing view and custom was that a candidate for holy orders (by which priesthood was meant) would first be made deacon and then, after a period of time with a duration that was never the subject of adequate discussion, every deacon became a priest. While there is an attempt in the ordinal to disclose the complementary and the collaborative relationship that ought to exist between deacon and priest, its descriptions were largely superfluous because in most places there were no deacons as the prevailing model of ministry was “one parish, one priest”.

The bigger parishes – those that could afford multiple clergy – had one or more assistant curates who were usually “junior” priests (meaning those in their first or second appointment after ordination). As curacies (seen predominantly as

apprenticeships) usually ranged between 2 and 4 years post-ordination to the diaconate, most of an individual's curacy was served as a priest because, as I have mentioned, newly ordained deacons expected to become priests within 12 months. This was the pattern when I was ordained 20 years ago. The only permanent deacons were those who had not completed their studies or who studied at a lower level or who had encountered some difficulty during their "deacon's year" that delayed their ordination to the priesthood.

I would also observe that much has changed in Anglican thinking and doing with respect to the principles of ordination and the practice of ordained ministry in a very short space of time. Put simply: we ought not underestimate the seismic shift in attitude and action over the past twenty years as we now do what would have been deemed unthinkable in the recent past. A quick survey of dioceses along the eastern seaboard of the continent reveals an incredible array of diaconal ministries that were simply unimaginable in the early 1990s. These ministries span parishes and sectors of enormous diversity, within and beyond the gathered church, exercised by women and men, of different ages with different abilities responding to different calls in response to different needs.

The Anglican Church appears without fanfare to have altered its view of the diaconate – its standing and status, its place and purpose – within the mission and ministry of the Church in the new millennia. This has happened in Sydney and Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra, for instance, for different reasons and produced different outcomes. Not surprisingly, there does not appear to be a unified view on the essence and expression of the diaconate although it has a role and a remit that it was not granted two decades ago. As an educator and trainer, I despair at the plurality of views (and divergence on whether deacons can and should conduct baptisms and weddings, for instance) in a church that asserts its reformed catholic

credentials. At least we can be thankful that theology is now beginning to catch up with practice.

For now we need to concede that there is no demonstrably consistent practice and no discernable coherent theology across the dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia. I would urge bishops and synods to make this a matter for urgent attention because it is one of first order importance. Private whims should not become public policy, as would appear to be the case in some parts of the country.

But how did we get here? In part conviction and, in part, circumstance. Since the late 1960s when evidence emerged of declining commitment to Christian belief and diminishing participation in Church life, Anglicans have thought about the shape and substance of mission and ministry. The focus has been on what it means to be called to the “ordained” ministry, the duties and responsibilities of the ordained as apart from the laity, the remuneration and regulation of those who are ordained, and the most effective employment of the ordained. There were attempts to defend the Anglican insistence on a three-fold order of ministry, namely deacons, priests and deacons, although there were effectively only two orders – bishops and priests – both of which could be relied upon to preserve the integrity of their order and to secure the interests of its members.

I do not detect much interest in analysing the gifts and abilities that are intrinsic to the exercise of priesthood and episcopate, and I do not see much effort in determining when and where the work of the two orders needed to be reviewed and revised for the sake of making mission and ministry more efficient. Priests wanted to do what bishops were doing; bishops were doing the work of priests. The diaconate existed in the theological mood of Anglicans but not in the practical organisation of pastoral ministry. It is fine to have a three-fold order of ministry but

you need to be clear about who does what, when and why if each order is to have its own integrity and the distraction of demarcation disputes is to be avoided.

I would contend that it is only in the last 5-10 years that Anglicans have directed serious attention to the office and work of the three orders of ministry, and what the priesthood of all believers might also mean in a Church that has historically been highly clericalised.

This might canvas conviction, what of circumstance? In brief: where the Church hasn't been able to provide a stipendiary priesthood it has resorted to a partially stipended or honorary diaconal ministry. Sadly, we have seen the provision of priestly ministry as the industry "gold-standard" and everything else as a compromise. This is partly a function of our doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) and the place it affords to the priesthood and partly a lack of missional imagination. Anglicans did ... what they had always done ... for so long with such success ... that they couldn't think of how to do things any other way when old patterns failed to deliver. The notion of a tried and true formula gave the impression that there was a right way and a wrong way to order ministry and this obscured the existence of a better way or even the best way ... overlooking the importance of cultural exegesis and the force and effect of context. One size fits all was the Anglican take on mission and ministry with minimal variation for local need.

The idea of "one parish, one priest" is no longer sustainable in material terms in many places; it is no relevant to a range of contexts which demand a different kind of witness to the coming Kingdom of God. In my view, we still have a hopelessly heirarchical view of ministry that imparts all kinds of crass and counter-Christian value judgements, such as clergy honorifics. Many people want an intensely priest-focussed ministry – dominated by word and sacrament – and this has led them to

devalue the ministry of the diaconate and the ministry of the laity ... and the work that deacons and lay people are called upon to perform.

This is where I want to start my prognostications about the diaconate in 2030. I chose the date because it will be well after I have retired and no-one will chastise an old man for being wrong ... and it is so far into the future that no-one will remember what I had said in 2012, hunt me down and put me to the sword for false prophecy – or so I hope.

When it comes to the future of the diaconate, the Church's attention must focus on the authenticity and integrity of this order of ministry and launch an education campaign within and without so that Anglicans are as aware of the distinctive character of diaconal ministry as they are of episcopal ministry. I cannot see any clear future without clarity on the office and work of a deacon – what a deacon is to be and to do. This sounds sensible but it is not straightforward because we are not helped by our foundational documents, particularly the ordinal.

I understand the need for historical continuity and the value of preserving the riches of the past; I am a devotee of the 1662 BCP and its wonderful legacy among Anglicans across the world – but the Ordinal is the start of the problem.

The Ordinal in our 1995 Prayer Book, based on the format of the BCP, needs to be reworked. I am calling for a thorough reworking and not a gentle revision that limits itself to the literary and poetic dimensions of the service. The context of ministry has changed radically – we no longer enjoy the active patronage of a Christian emperor. The conditions in which ministry is practised have undergone fundamental upheaval – we can no longer rely on popular culture to support and sustain a “professional” ministry class. The BCP and the APBA both fail to set out

clearly the distinctive character of the diaconate. I am referring here to the exhortation and the vows.

The distinctions that it acknowledges are too subtle for most readers. Furthermore, the ordinals in both the 1662 and 1995 books presuppose a Christendom context which simply doesn't exist any longer.

So, the future of the diaconate will be served by clarity about the office and work of a deacon and that needs to start with an ordinal that addresses the real world with clear injunctions for those who enter such a ministry and clear insights for those who receive such a ministry. Deacons are not priests spoken about in a muffled voice. As a counterpart to this reworking, I would urge the church to cease publication of the prayer book in two versions – one large and one small – the red one and the allegedly “popular” green one, the latter being a “Sunday” book without the ordinal – as though it wasn't relevant to what happens on Sundays. If you want a community that understands the character and content of ministry, give them a book that contains the ordinal.

The kind of education campaign I would encourage would include the recruitment and training of discernment panels at a parish and diocesan level. If there is confusion within the Church about the office and work of deacons, we need to have consistency in vocational panels who are acquainted with the distinctive character of the diaconate and the particular gifts that are needed in someone who believes they have been called to this work. In my view, call is best understood as the coincidence of gift and need illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Inasmuch as God calls more to ordained ministry than answer, we need to have regular teaching and preaching on the individual's gifts, the church's need and how the Spirit works to bring them together.

Raising the profile of the diaconate involves clear instruction and pastoral guidance because we persist in thinking of ordination as a reward or something to which the most enthusiastic resort to prove their commitment. Neither is healthy. Discernment is the duty of the whole people of God – it starts where a person is ministering and ends when the people of God are asked to “accept gladly” those to be ordained. I am barely confident that diocesan appointed discernment panels know enough about diaconal ministry to determine whether a person is called to one order of ministry as apart from another ... and why.

Let me make one last point about the ordering of ministry and the Prayer Book. I am increasingly coming to the view that the distinctiveness of the diaconate would be protected and preserved by a change in our approach to ordination. At the moment, those who are destined to be priests are first ordained deacon. There is no Biblical warrant or scriptural injunction for this custom. It is just that – a custom. I have heard the argument for cascading vocation – that every priest is also a deacon. I can see the appeal of such an approach but also its problems, especially for the diaconate, when priests insist that they are deacons too and can and should do the work of deacons. You might hear them say: “This community doesn’t need to have a deacon because I am a deacon”. Technically yes, this is true although priests will never wear the stole deacon-style in worship. I want to see this change so that we distinguish between the separate orders of ministry and abandon any notion that the office and work can be conflated into priesthood – for the sake of the diaconate.

Once we have educated our leaders and our followers on the distinct nature of the two orders, we will have provided the basis for a reconfigured diaconate that no longer needs to plead for its own existence and the preservation of its own

integrity – which is where we are now. This brings me to education and training for the diaconate. There is inconsistency and ad hocery on this subject as well.

At the moment, education and training offered by institutions like Ridley, Trinity and St Mark's is largely configured for priesthood and the needs of priests. The usual thinking is for deacons to receive less of the same thing, implying that the deacon is 20% or 30% or 40% of a priest. Deacons do not usually receive different training, just less of what priests are offered or obliged to do. A good deal more thought and reflection needs to happen here. Both theological education and vocational training need to be reconfigured around the revised ordinal I am calling for the Church to produce. We need to start with the ordinal, settle on what the deacon is meant to be and to do, develop an inventory of abilities and aptitudes against which we design education and training with special provision for the diversity of diaconal ministry (which is more diverse than priestly ministry in my view because it is more shaped by context).

Let me here suggest a critical difference between priestly and diaconal ministry – as it seems to be evolving. In my view, we will do well to divide our efforts into two categories: mission and ministry. Mission has its focus beyond the gathered community where the principal beneficiaries are people who are not members of the Church. Ministry has its focus within the gathered community where the principal beneficiaries are the members of the Church. Priests have their primary focus within the gathered community; deacons are most active beyond it. This divide, and it is more an analytical tool than an organisational principle, can help us to assess where the bulk of our effort is located. In effect, is the Church serving itself or others? At St Mark's, 95% of our effort is serving the Church because the beneficiaries of what we do are overwhelmingly Church people. Many parishes, if they were to conduct an audit, would find that 80% or perhaps more of their efforts were directly internally. In effect, there is much more ministry than mission.

But if we have an order of ministry whose focus is beyond the gathered community, we avoid duplication (deacons trying to be priests) and we ensure an outward focus. I am not saying here that deacons do not have a place and a function in the gathered community or that the remit of priests is restricted to those who are Church people. But in wanting to secure a place for the diaconate and to prioritise outreach, I am inviting Anglicans to consider a very broad and general outlook which finds complementary between the roles of deacons and priests.

Adopting this approach creates a need for diaconate-specific education and training which will be construed around mission, outreach and engagement. As people who can make connections within and between communities, who facilitate conversation and encourage dialogue, who can identify shared interests and common aspirations, deacons will be different kinds of people to priests and their formational needs will be different. At the moment, few institutions like the one I lead have managed to make any progress on devising diaconate-specific programs although we have tailored courses and subjects of a very generic kind that take seriously the office and work of a deacon.

Let me move now to appointments and licensing. Given all I have observed, I am not surprised that the appointment of deacons across our church is a bit of a shambles. The same is true of licensing, in terms of policies and procedures. Each diocese and each bishop, despite assertions that we have a unified polity based on a legally-binding constitution, does their own thing. The ACA is not a national entity but 23 warring tribes kept apart by a peacekeeping mission known as the General Synod. Neither dioceses nor bishops display much respect for what the others do. We give up on unity before managing disunity. Nevertheless, I suspect some

common themes in the appointment and licensing of deacons will be evident over the next 20 years.

I expect that deacons will be appointed to most chaplaincies, social clusters, ethnic groups, industrial and professional bodies, as well as geographic parishes, with increasing regularity. This will be driven by demands from communities that want a Christian minister but cannot afford or do not want a full-time priest, and by the increasingly specialisation of sector ministry. The “generalist” is already in retreat. With the proliferation of the diaconate, attention will need to be given to licensing. It is vital that every deacon be connected not just to a priest but to a “base” community, be it a parish or some other established worshipping community. While deacons might work on the edge, we don’t want them disappearing over the horizon. Being out of sight means being out of mind which also means being out of prayerful support and possibly out of control. How we support and sustain deacons in their ministries is another area of concern. There won’t be one way of doing this but a multitude of ways. But we will need to educate priests and train parishes to support and sustain their deacons who are usually working in the godless postmodern badlands that St John’s refers to as “the world” in his epistles. Perhaps we could touch on this matter further in the question time to follow.

In closing, it will have become plain to you that I believe defining diaconal ministry and preparing the Church and the world for its exercise will be highly influential in determining the shape of the diaconate in 2030. The time to act is now when things are so fluid and flexibility is an obvious element in thinking and acting. I can easily imagine a future in which there is one or more deacons attached to every parish, taking forward its mission in defined areas; I can easily imagine deacons being active in the traditional health, education and welfare sectors but making their presence felt in workplaces, and among a range of sub-groups in our society ranging from those gathered around sport and leisure to race and culture. It is my

prayer that deacons are not seen as a pool of cheap clergy, and it is my hope that their education and training is formalised and regularised.

There will be some “bumping and grinding” as we move towards this new future. For instance, there is the challenge of an outreach gathering becoming a fixed community. Does the deacon move on or become a priest and stay? In terms of support, will we expect an archdeacon (who is a deacon) to supervise and perhaps direct deacons at a diocesan level or deal with them and the priests together as ordained ministers?

I am excited and energised by the circumstances that have obliged the Church to rethink mission and ministry in this new millennium. The focus has shifted from an unhealthy preoccupation with order and structure to outreach and engagement – to reach people for Christ and proclaiming the kingdom in their midst. While the Church is currently being pressed on every side, God is dragging us into a future that we would not have chosen for ourselves. But I am not alarmed or anxious about this because God is already there.

I now look forward to your comments and slightly less to your complaints.