

## **The Ministry of Deacons**

The office of Deacon is one that exists in several Church communions. However, despite its near universal currency there is no unanimity concerning who a deacon is and what a deacon does. These two factors admit a bewildering variety of understandings and practices. This is so not only in terms of differences existing between communions but also within individual ones of them.

As is always the case whenever new and emerging ministry challenges confront the Church in general and individual communions in particular, effective ministry response becomes a matter of great importance. This in turn calls for renewed reflection on orders and patterns of ministry existing in the Church and individual communions. Based on the nature of challenges now being faced, the office and function of deacons have become a matter that calls for renewed reflection. Of course the matter is made no easier by the fact that up to now, diversity in both understanding and practice of the office and role respectively has been the order of the day.

It is here conceded that profitable reflection will benefit from looking at New Testament evidence, developments in the early church tradition and practice, later development prior to what may be regarded as the modern period and then the contemporary period. It is understandable that by the scope of the presentation the examination undertaken will be little more than cursory. However it is hoped that from the insights gained, the questions related to the deacons may be seen in a more helpful perspective, current understanding and practices may be properly assessed, and further attempts to give effective expression to the office and role may be helpfully guided.

### **New Testament Witness**

Ministry within the Church is fundamentally of an inclusive nature. Every member of the church ought to share in its collective ministry. God in Christ by means of the gift of the spirit endows every member of the church with a ministry gift for the common good of the Church itself – Rom. 12:3-8; 1Cor. 12:4ff. Eph. 4:7-13; 1Pet. 4:10ff. Ministry responsibility on the part of every member is therefore a New Testament provision and requirement.

At the same time however, the New Testament also witnesses to special ministry roles to be carried out by certain functionaries within local congregations. Elders or Overseers [Bishops] and deacons are a prominent and significant case in point. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-12; Elders are found far more frequently and independently of any accompanying reference to deacons, Acts 11:30; 15:2, 5, 22; 16:4; 20:7; 1Tim. 5:17. Yet in the instances where deacons appear, they do so in association with elders. What this may suggest will emerge in the discussion to follow.

What then can be gleaned from the New Testament about the deacon and the deacon's role?

- ❖ The word that is rendered Deacon {diakonos} in the special sense of the office is the same word that is used in a more general sense for servant or minister –Phil. 1:1; 1Tim. 3:8, 12; Rom. 16: cf Rom. 13:4; 1Cor 3:5; 2Cor. 3:6; 11:23; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:7. Whatever the office of deacon meant it was in the end a specially designated function role or expression of the more general category of ministry shared by all within the church. The status of deacons, with reference to superiority in relation to other members of the church does not arise in any way whatever.
- ❖ There are three clear and unambiguous references to the office of deacon in the New Testament – Phil. 1:1; 1Tim. 3:8, 11. In all of the references deacons appear in association with Elders or Overseers [Bishops]. This suggests that deacons worked in ministry partnership with elders serving as significant help or assistant. Interestingly, nothing whatever is stated about the origin of the office or the duties involved. It can only be taken that such matters were well known and that there were no problems ostensibly related to them so there was no necessity to make reference to them.

What we are given in the Timothy references are qualities and characteristics of persons eligible for the office. They were to be worthy or respect, sincere, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not slanderers, not pursuing gain. They were to hold the mystery of the faith with a good conscience, to be good managers of their household and married to one wife. It is the view of some interpreters that based upon the qualities and characteristics referred to there could be inferred something of the functions to be carried out by a deacon.

The dignity and seemingly high reputation that were necessary pointed to the fact that they might have had to be engaged in a deputation work on behalf of the Church. This would have warranted their being highly respected both within the Church and outside. The requirement that they be persons who managed their household well and who comported themselves with much self-discipline meant they might have had administrative function in the affairs of the Church. Exemplary conduct in the areas referred to would be a great asset in this regard. The statement that they were not to be greedy for gain pointed to a specific role in relation to finances and or material possessions which demanded honesty. The most that can be said is that the roles named do not appear to be unreasonable inferences but there is no certainty about them. Subsequent developments in relation to the office and its practice include functions that have been here inferred.

In Romans 16:1 Paul uses the same word which is used in the special sense for Deacon as well as in the more general sense for Servant or Minister [Diakonos] in relation to Phoebe and her role in the congregation at Cenchreae. If the use of the term in relation to Phoebe is in the formal and technical sense as Deacon in the local congregation, then the reference here would make it a matter of four instead of three direct references to the office in the New Testament – cf. 1Phil. 11; 1Tim. 3: 8,12.

This would also represent incontrovertible evidence that women were eligible for the office and actually functioned in it. Of course there are those who believe that the instructions given to the women, who in some translations, are assumed to be Deacons' wives in 1Tim. 3:11 were actually female Deacons. The word used there was not the regular Greek word for 'wife' but for 'woman'. The instructions given are similar in significant ways to those given to the Deacons. Yet there are others who would deny that they were deacons. They argue that there would have been no need to single out women for instructions were they being instructed as deacons. It also seems as if the instructions to deacons resumed in verse 12 after a break at verse eleven to deal with the women. As said however, if Phoebe was being referred to as a deacon in the formal sense of the word then it would put the whole question beyond doubt that already women were eligible for the office and actually performed it.

There would also probably be a hint at the function of a deacon or an aspect of it based on what is said further about Phoebe. She is described as having been in a helping role in the congregation, to say the least – Rom. 16:2. This is one of the things which for one reason or another has been associated with the role of the deacon in most instances in subsequent development.

As it stands however, it remains a hotly debated subject whether Phoebe is to be regarded as a deacon in the formal and official sense or whether the term used in relation to her must be understood in the more general sense of servant. The state of indecision concerning the matter is amply represented in various versions of the Bible in their rendering of the term. A survey in this regard would prove very instructive. To date the matter remains unresolved. While there are those who see no reason why it should not be taken for granted that Phoebe was a deacon in the specialized sense, there are others who think that there is no real reason why she should be considered in such terms.

It remains a wide open question and so nothing decisive about who a deacon was then and what was the deacon's role can be based on Phoebe's designation. Whatever is claimed has to be claimed in a tentative manner.

- ❖ A passage that has had a very influential role to play in the consideration of the New Testament witness is one in which the term deacon itself does not appear at all. The passage is Acts 6:1-7. It has been traditionally held that the event reported on in this passage constitutes the institution of the Diaconate. It was the case of the setting apart or commissioning of seven men of good report to minister to the needs of Hebrew-Greek speaking widows who had complained of being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Apostles who addressed the complaint did not think it prudent to divert from their task of dealing with the word of God and engagement in prayer to become involved in meeting the need of the women. As a result the seven men spoken of as being 'in good standing, full of the spirit and wisdom' were delegated to minister to the need that was the subject of the complaint.

What is the basis of the tradition that this represented the institution of the diaconate? It has already been pointed out that the word deacon [diakonos] does not appear at all in the passage. The connection however lies in the fact that though the noun representing the title is not used, the related verb meaning to serve [diakonein] is used to indicate what the men would do, that is to serve or wait on tables – 6:2. Another noun ‘service’ [diakonia] of the same connection is also used but it is used both for service in relation to the daily distribution as well as the work to which the Apostles were committed, 6:1; 6:4. This latter word therefore does not make as strong and direct a point as is claimed for the verbal connection. How strong this connection really has become a matter of serious debate.

Those who consider the appointment of the seven to be the founding event naturally trace many later practices back to it. Since it was men who were chosen, there are those who see the diaconate as a male preserve. The number seven has been considered significant, and so for example in Roman Catholic circles for a long time the number of deacons was restricted to seven only. As the seven were appointed in relation to the daily distribution of food for the neglected ones, the work of the deacon has been seen to have a very strong welfare association within the Church. The appointment seemed to have been a congregational one and so many feel that such appointments ought always to be made by the congregation. There was a specific act of setting apart with laying on of hands. This act is taken by many to represent one of ordination. Such then are some of the things with variations here and there that are thought to have originated with the event of the appointment of the seven and which marked the institution of the diaconate.

There is no doubt that this tradition has had long lasting influence on the continuing place of deacons within the life of the Christian Church over the centuries. Yet there are those who have come to question the appropriateness of the direct link that has been between the appointment of the seven in Acts and the office of deacon. Too much it is believed has been built on too little evidence.

It has already been pointed out that nowhere in the story or anywhere else have the men been called deacons. The verb that is considered to supply the link is used in a general sense many places elsewhere and with no hint of any special technical usage as is being claimed in this instance – Luke 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; 22:26-27; Jn. 12:2, 26. It is not without significance that so soon after the appointment for the specific task that Stephen and Philip are found engaged in what has been described as ‘a highly individualistic preaching ministry’. This was unrelated to what would have been their substantive office of waiting on tables as deacons.

The men actually seemed to have been appointed to a special task in a given moment and in a given circumstance. They were appointed in their own right and were identified by name not unlike the twelve. There is no indication that when they no longer operated in the office that they were replaced by successors. Stephen was killed and others were scattered because of persecution but there were no named successors as far as the evidence stands. The

appointment was a special event, calming the discontent that was registered and forestalling what could have been a seriously disruptive factor in the life of the fledgling church.

The laying on of hands no doubt represented some form of authorization but it is going too far, it is believed, to regard it as ordination to an office of a permanent nature and as precedence to be followed. These men were said to have been already filled with the Spirit so it does not seem as if it meant that any special or additional spiritual gift was being endowed by the act of laying on of hands.

In further denying that the event had anything to do with the institution of the diaconate, a very interesting view has been advanced that serving tables really had nothing to do with being engaged in welfare activity. This view is associated with John Collins and has caught the attention of many. His view is that in the fellowship that was shared in the homes there was breaking of bread and teaching of the word daily, 2:42, 46-47; 5:42. It was in such a setting that the particular set of women felt neglected. It sprang from the fact they were Greek speaking and the teaching that was being done at the time of the breaking of bread was done in Aramaic. They were therefore not benefiting from the teaching as they ought on such occasions. The Apostles did not feel that they could be diverted from their task of dealing with the larger groups on such occasions and at public worship. Therefore the seven were appointed to do the teaching that the women and others like them needed. All the men were Greek speaking. They were therefore not serving at tables but rather served tables where the special teaching needs existed. It is significant that the comment that immediately follows the account of the appointment is about the spreading of the Word of God and increase in the number of disciples. The further preaching activity of Stephen and Philip is also thought to be in line with this view. Whether this view is correct or not no one is sure.

What is clear is that the manner in which for a long time it has been taken for granted that the appointment of the seven constituted the institution of the office and function and diaconate cannot be as confidently maintained. The way positions and views have sometimes been stated with much dogmatism and inflexibility based on the belief that the appointment of seven supplies adequate grounds for them, demands some second thought. It must be recognized that indeed the evidence is certainly not available to associate the origin of the diaconate with any confidence with the event in the Acts of the Apostles, strong and influential as the tradition has been to do so.

An interesting way in which some think this event may still serve a useful purpose is that while it may not be seen as the originating act it may still serve as a kind of prototype. This related to how a particular form of ministry may emerge in response to specific need, especially membership care. It also points in the direction of the way the certain qualities are highlighted as requirements for the exercise of the particular ministry. A prototype while it stands as model, is always subject to variations, adaptations and adjustments as warranted by circumstances and contextual particularities. It would be no different in this case. At best the event of the

appointment of the seven may be seen in such a prototypical relation to the development of the diaconate.

The New Testament confirms that the office and function of deacons existed in local congregations in its times. Deacons worked in close association with Elders or Overseers [Bishops] probably in an assisting role in special areas of care and administration. Certain qualities of Christian commitment, character and life-style were considered important for eligibility for the office. Certain details in relation to the office are not given in any of the contexts in which it is referred to unambiguously. Its origin, the method of appointment to it and its duration are some of such details and many of these continue to be matters of debate.

### **The Golden Years**

The years following the New Testament period down to about the fifth or sixth century (CE) have been called the golden years of the deacon. The evidence for the existence of the office is impressive. Its prominence and influence in the life of the Church were significant. The role deacons played varied but seemed to have embraced a range of liturgical and administrative functions. What accounted for this is not all clear but some factors seem to suggest themselves.

The Church was spreading with congregations growing in number. It was at the same time assuming institutional features as it settled down and so institutional needs in terms of administration and management had to be dealt with. Ministry needs would also have increased and certainly become more varied in the process. These then might have been some of the factors which in one way or another would account for the diaconate to have to come into its own in such a prominent way at the time.

A sample of the evidence is in order.

- a) In a manual of moral instruction and church order, a handbook of church discipline, called **Didache [c.AD 60]** deacons are placed alongside prophets and teachers and are described as persons worthy of the Lord, meek, not lovers of money, truthful, approved and honourable.

In the 1st Epistle of Clement to the **Corinthians [c.AD96]** – a letter emerging in the church of Rome – deacons are described as converts to the faith, persons willing to be examined, approved by the Holy Spirit, believers who have a responsibility to other believers [1 Cement 42:4-5]

- b) In the Epistle of Ignatius to the **Ephesians [AD98-116]** a deacon identified as Burrhus, is described as a fellow servant with the bishop who is a recipient of God's blessings and whose service to the Church brings honour to both the Church and the bishop. The deacon appears to be a sort of assistant to the bishop.

In the Epistle to the **Magnesians 6:1** deacons are described as persons entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ; and in the Epistle to the **Trallians [2:2-3]** deacons are said to be servants of the mysteries of Christ, persons of integrity and persons to whom the Church owes loyalty. They are messengers sent to distant churches [3].

The Epistle to the **Smyrnaeans** mentions the need to hold deacons in high esteem [8:1] describing them as persons devoted to the cause of God and cared for by the church [10:1] they are called fellow-servants of the Lord with other church leaders [12:2].

Writing to the **Philadelphians**, Ignatius, a bishop of the church claimed that deacons are persons who experience a oneness with the Church and are eager for the unity of the church. They are appointed according to the mind or will of Christ and are established, that is ordained, by the Holy Spirit [1:1]. That same correspondence describes deacons as fellow servants of the Lord Jesus with the Church leaders. They are workers who tirelessly seek the spiritual well-being of the church [4:1]

c) **The Shepherd** [of Hermas AD 148] explains that deacons are persons who are willing to affirm partnership with others in the work of the ministry. They co-operate with others in the work of leadership and appreciate the values which make for peaceful co-existence, including willingness to listen to others [5:1]

d) In the writings of Justin Martyr, deacons are described as persons serving tables [1st Apology 65-67] and Hippolytus claimed that deacons must serve the bishop. They are allowed to administer the Eucharistic cup, if not enough presbyters are present [**Apostolic Traditions 23, 26, 30, 33.**]

In the **Didascalia Apostolorum** of the Syrian Church, deacons are described as Bishops' assistants.

What has emerged is that the office clearly became a highly formalized and permanent feature of the Churches' life. The Church developed a threefold pattern of ministry with Bishops, Elders and Deacons. Deacons were third in the hierarchal structure and held their office for life. Their function would have varied from place to place but they did perform important liturgical functions and administrative duties especially related to management of property and care of members. They were excluded from celebration of the Eucharist which was reserved for the Bishop or the Priest, so also were the granting of absolution and the pronouncement of blessings. They were however allowed to read the Gospels and Epistles at the Eucharist. They received the offerings and recorded the names of the donors. They were allowed to assist the Bishop and after a while the Priest in the distribution of the elements to the people and participated in prayers. All this along with the work of distributing alms and ministering to the welfare of the members

made their role one of great importance. There even emerged the office of Archdeacon, the chief deacon of a specific place who served as the bishop's chief administrative officer.

## **The Decline**

The Golden period did not last. Clearly tension might have developed at least in relation to the Priest. What is sure however is that at the onset of the middle ages there was a definite decline in the influence and curtailment of liturgical function of deacons. In the West in Episcopal Churches the diaconate became no more than an interim stage in preparation for the priesthood. Of course in the Eastern Church the order of deacons remained a permanent one and it seemed to have been restricted to men who had reached a designated canonical age.

Again what is evident is that while the diaconate had a place within the Church it was subject to much variation and diversity in terms of its role and function. In principle it retained its status in relation to the Bishop and the Priest. It was a ministry in its own right but at the same time it was in assistance of the others. There was no merging or blurring of the lines however much the functions of the deacon widened in some instances and places. Deacons were Deacons as such. The role seemed to have been influenced by and responsive to Ministry and Church needs within a band of activities including liturgical ones, but they seemed to have remained excluded from certain functions which were the preserve of the bishop and the priest.

## **Resurgence of Interest and Contemporary Realities**

Whatever it is, whether there is something constant in the nature of what the diaconate represents with all the diversity it displays otherwise or in the very nature of what the church represents and the needs it is called upon to serve, the diaconate as a form of ministry has shown much resilience. There has been a resurgence of interest in it and there have been attempts to state or restate its place and function within the economy of the Church's life and ministry, especially in the face of new ministry challenges.

Both the Church of England and Roman Catholic communions have sought to redefine its place and give it a more significant place than that which had befallen it. Whereas the Church of England abolished some other lower orders of ministry it had recognized, it retained the diaconate as the lowest order of ecclesiastical ministry. In this case there was a two-fold understanding of it. It consisted of those who were deacons only as interim stage on the way to their becoming priests and also of a permanent office for those who were not going to become priests but who were received as 'vocational' or distinctive deacons. A little after the mid-nineteen eighties women were admitted to the order of deacons in England following the precedence that had been set in some other provinces.

As with so many other things, Vatican II became a moment when a new move was made in relation to the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church. At the Council there was vision of the possibility of restoration of a permanent diaconate in the Church and a procedure was established for that purpose.

This saw the procedure being put into practice in some places soon after. The order became open to older married men. Younger men who joined it were expected to remain celibate. The duties of the deacon set out by the Council's constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) included to baptize when properly authorized, administer communion (as distinct from celebrating it) assist at and bless weddings, instruct and exhort and administer last rites to the dying. Incidentally these are duties that are of the same nature as those allowed to the Anglican diaconate.

In the reformed tradition deacons administered alms and cared for the sick and infirm. In Presbyterianism within this tradition there is also the practice of having a deacons' court. This court is concerned with the distribution of the Church's goods and management of its temporal affairs.

Among the **Disciples of Christ** a group which emerged out of the Presbyterianism in the nineteenth century, deacons are understood to be 'public servants of the church in all things pertaining to its internal and external relations'.

In many **United Churches**, which include former Presbyterian and Congregational Churches, elders share in the work of the Pastor, but deacons carry out welfare functions.

Within **Methodism**, there is no consensus on the role of deacons. In British Methodism, the office of deacon does not exist. Meanwhile, the Methodist Church in America recognizes a deacon as an ordained person on the way to becoming a fully qualified and recognized minister. The deacon is a person on probation and is able to perform some of the duties of eldership.

### **What of Baptists?**

The early Baptists appear to have regarded deacons as ministers. John Smyth, who organized the first Baptist Church in Amsterdam, identified two sorts of ministers in the Church.

*Christ has set in His outward Church two sorts of ministers, viz. some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer the word and sacraments, and others who are called deacons – men and women – whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints feet.*

**Thomas Helwys**, colleague of John Smyth, who organized the first Baptist Church on British soil in 1612, envisaged a Church congregation having several Elders as well as deacons. Both Elders and deacons alike should be appointed by the Church of which they are members, with fasting, prayer and the laying on of hands. Yet though from this it was envisaged that a Church would have multiple elders, eventually in many Baptist Churches eldership came to be identified with a one-person ministry along with deacons who continued to serve the ministry of the church. In some of these Churches a three-fold pattern pastor, elders and deacons remains. The current situation with Baptists in different parts of the world and even sometimes within the same country reflects the same varied and diverse understanding of the place and function of deacons in the Church.

In recent times, among British Baptists, the deacons' responsibilities have been described as follows ---

-**Example:** to be a good example to the rest of the Church members.

-**Decision-making**: participating in the decision-making functions in the church, offering needed leadership;

- **Unity** : serving the maintenance of unity within the church – theological unity, unity in purpose, unity between age groups, unity within and between church organizations and unity between the minister and church members.

- **Good Administration**: contributing to the facilitation of good administration.

- **Christian Growth**: promoting Christian growth among members, by fostering members' support of the opportunities for growth which the church offers.

- **Outreach**: stimulating the church to be involved in evangelism and service.

Among Baptists in the United States of America, the deacons' role is variously understood. Let us take one example in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The office of deacon is described as one not of authority, but of service rendered by one who agrees to be an example in spirit, love, devotion and loyalty. The original purpose of a deacon is said to have been significant to preserve the spiritual fellowship of the church. Today, according to this understanding, deacons are to take care of families in the church. They maintain regular contact with Church members so that encouragement, support and nurture are provided. They visit in the homes of church members to maintain a contact from the church. In times of crisis, each deacon seeks to provide Christian concern and ministry.

Within the **Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU)** the second edition of Guide to Church Membership which came out in 1973, explained that the varied ministries of the Church exist under Christ. Regarding bishop and elder as interchangeable words in Scripture, the Guide states that elders correspond to officers in JBU churches and that bishops correspond to pastors of local congregations. The elder, The Guide says, 'is one who sees to the job to be done and gives some spiritual oversight'. According to The Guide in the New Testament, deacons are helpers in the churches. "The function of the Deacon today', says The Guide is more like that of an Elder. He must be a man greatly respected for his faith, behaviour and leadership. He has a ministry to the fellow members and is responsible for oversight, particularly in his area, but also in the fellowship as a whole. He is elected by the members, then ordained" (p20). This is the closest we get to a clear official statement on the role of the deacons in the JBU churches.

Notwithstanding the male gender bias of the language used, both male and female serve as deacons in the church. In what is said deacons are seen to have a responsibility that relates to spiritual welfare of the members in particular but also not without interest otherwise in the general life of the church. The responsibilities are not spelt out in any detail probably wisely so since they would most likely vary amongst circuits of churches and congregations. However, things like participating in the celebration of the Lord's Supper especially praying and distributing elements, taking communion to the sick and infirm, preaching, administering welfare fund or provision, where this is in operation, generally constituting a

body which assist the pastor in ministry matters including disciplinary ones would probably be amongst the responsibilities of deacons.

Such things as the manner in which deacons are selected or appointed, the duration of their tenure and the way they are acknowledged, recognized or set-apart by the congregation are not matters on which there have been any guidelines. There seems to be an ever increasing need for such guidelines noting what seem to be disagreements of a divisive nature concerning such matters which are becoming more and more evident in our midst. Such guidelines among other things will protect against arbitrary decision-making and actions on the part of individuals or groups, preserve the integrity and function of the office and reflect the corporate will of the church under the guidance of the Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, amongst the variations and diversities that characterize the whole matter of the diaconate and its function there are still certain constants that merit some careful notice. These cannot but make a salutary impact on whatever is thought, said and done as far as the diaconate is concerned.

What are the constants?

(a) The persistent presence and function of the office. Changes occurred in its influence and prominence at one time or another and in different settings and circumstances. However the need for such an office in one form or another was always felt. The very title itself remained throughout, probably because it speaks of the fundamental servant character of the office which is so absolutely essential at all times in the life of the church.

(b) The association of the office with the office of the pastor or priest in an assisting or helping role even though it is at the same time an office in its own right. It is not an office that functions independently or in a total substitutionary fashion in relation to the office of the pastor or priest or its equivalent.

(c) Certain functions such as those concerned with membership welfare and involvement in the worship-life of the church seem to have been constant features of the role of deacons.

(d) There seemed to have been certain qualities that remained consistent requirements for the holding of the office. These are influenced greatly by the list found in the New Testament - 1Tim. 3:8ff; cf Acts 6:3 (7) (e) There seem to be a consistent adaptability of the office that makes it an office that is particularly responsive to ministry needs at the level of congregational needs and members welfare as they emerge from time to time. This no doubt accounts for the measure of diversity that is so much itself one of the constraints associated with the office.