

- Serve as advocates for the disabled, the disenfranchised, patients, prisoners and their families, etc.
- Serve as teachers, trainers and facilitators for a variety of community organizations.
- Serve on a variety of non-profit boards, often functioning as the conscience of the organization.
- Serve as mentors and teachers for those in formation to become deacons.

What they share in common is an intense desire to do something constructive about the needs of the world around them and a passion to enable others to join them in the work that needs to be done. The deacon has a clear understanding that his or her role within the Church is not to go out single-handedly to do all of the work in sight. Rather the deacons understand their role as enablers of the ministries of others.

For example: Is a soup kitchen needed in the community? The deacon finds people interested in working in a soup kitchen, facilitates training, helps to coordinate the practical aspects of location and equipment. Then, when the soup kitchen is smoothly functioning as a defined ministry of the congregation, with committed lay leadership, the deacon bows out and moves on.

As another deacon put it, “I see my principal job as being the conscience of my congregation. I never let them forget about the work that needs to be done, and keep after them until we get it done together.”

At this point in the description of being a deacon, perhaps the question that comes to mind is that favourite question asked of candidates by Commissions on Ministry: “Tell me, do you really need to be ordained a deacon to do the work you want to do?” A good question, to which perhaps the best answer is that those who feel a true call to the servant ministry would do what they do no matter what, but the Church as the gathered Body of Christ needs to hold up its deacons as icons of service, as enablers around whom ministries can coalesce and grow like pearls around a grain of sand inside a dam's shell.

Listen again to the words quoted at the outset:

*I think God hungers for the Church to become a Servant Community and if this is to happen, it must be because of the leadership and example of its deacons.*

This is a bold vision of a servant church gathered in the world, not to look inward, to focus primarily on the concerns and interests of its members, but rather a Church that rejoices in a mission to make The Good News of Jesus Christ a living reality to all in the world who suffer, to all who have needs, to all who are condemned by circumstance to be less than God has made them to be. This is a vision of a servant church that remembers and takes to heart the words Jesus quoted from Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry:

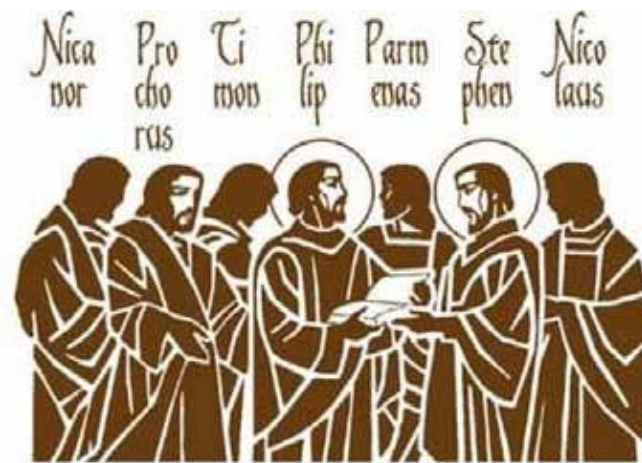
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to Let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. [Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19]

This is a vision of a servant church that sees its central calling as doing the work of Jesus Christ, not talking about it; of a Church that sees the purpose of corporate worship as providing strength and guidance to roll up its collective sleeves and get to work to make the world in which we live look just a little bit more like that kingdom to which Jesus calls us.

This is a vision of what might be possible if the deacons of the Church – those persons called and ordained to the servant ministry – continue by deed and example to lead and enable their congregations to do the work God has given us to do. It is a big challenge. It is a dream God hungers to see realized. It is the spirit that motivates, energizes and sustains the individuals who carry the title of deacon.

*For information about the diaconate in the Diocese of Montréal, contact the Bishop's Office at [bishops.office@montreal.anglican.ca](mailto:bishops.office@montreal.anglican.ca) or by phone at (514) 843-6577.*

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## THE DIACONATE

### On Being a deacon: A Personal Reflection

*I think God hungers for the Church to become a Servant Community and, if this is to happen, it must be because of the leadership and example of its deacons.*

R. Stewart Wood, Jr. Bishop of Michigan

### What is a deacon and what might it mean to be one?

St. Stephen and six others “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” were ordained by the earliest Church to take the bread of the sacrament to the Greek widows, thus freeing the Apostles for “prayer and serving the word.” This event, described in Acts 6:1-6, is commonly taken to be the origin of the sacred order of deacons and, indeed, this short passage contains many seeds of the modern diaconate.

The word “deacon” comes from the Greek diakonia, meaning “servant” — especially in the context of one who serves at table. Even today, the diaconate is often called the “servant ministry,” and it is the ideal of service that motivates the men and women in our own time who have sought ordination to this order of ministry. Perhaps, the most important aspect for understanding the ministry of the deacon is the understanding that the deacon is to model the ministry of Christ — to reach out to the

poor, the hungry, the lonely, the helpless, the sick, and the disenfranchised.

In the time of the earliest Church, the deacons went out from the midst of the congregation to serve the needs of the people, bringing back to the worshipers news of those whom they served. During the next four centuries, deacons became known as the administrative arm of the Church, handling finances, distributing alms and, in the case of deacon Athanasius, handling the organization of a church council and drafting the Creed we know as the Nicene.

However, by the sixth century, the diaconate had become used primarily as a way station on the road to priesthood and the original concept of deacon as servant was lost — until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when both the Roman and Anglican communions sought a return to recognition of the servant ministry.

As the Church reclaims the ancient understanding of the order of deacons, so we must differentiate between permanent or vocational deacons and those intending to be ordained presbyter, who are typically referred to as transitional deacons. Those who are called to the vocational diaconate seek to remain in that order. Their ministry is seen as separate and equal to the priest and their spiritual leadership is a pastoral ministry seeking to serve others and to help others serve.

*I think God hungers for the Church to become a Servant Community...*

From Sunday School onward, Christians are bombarded with reminders that service to others is a primary responsibility of each member of the Body of Christ. And the Church continues to serve the world in a wonderful variety of ministries — from soup kitchens to schools, from disaster relief to homeless shelters, from distribution of food and clothes to the needy to the care of AIDS patients. From ministries carried on quietly by one or two committed people, to large organizations serving thousands, the work of the Church continues as it has from earliest days, when the seven servants were commissioned for the work of the table.

The Church as a whole is not yet a servant community. It is a worshiping community that engages in service. That is why the work of the sacred order of deacons is beginning to have an impact on the future shape of the Church — an impact that may yet result in the transformation of the Church into a true servant community.

A common way to describe the work of a deacon as distinct from the work of a presbyter is to say that the presbyter serves as the bridge between the Church and God — a ministry of teaching and leading, while the deacon is the bridge between the Church and the world — a ministry of servanthood and enabling. It is the deacon who goes into the world to learn its needs and its pains, brings them back into the Church gathered as the Body of Christ, and then takes the Church back out into the world to minister to those needs and pains.

The servant ministry of the deacon is symbolized in the principal duties assigned to the deacon when the Body of Christ gathers for corporate worship in the celebration of the Eucharist:

- The deacon proclaims the Gospel to the congregation — sharing the Good News of Christ Jesus.
- The deacon introduces the confession — encouraging the congregation to purify themselves for service.
- The deacon offers the Prayers of the People, or the petitions for the needs of the world and individuals — calling to mind the needs of the world both within the parish family and in the communities and world in which we live.
- The deacon sets the table for the Great Thanksgiving — modelling the historic servanthood of deacons and of their origins in the earliest Church. And finally,
- The deacon dismisses the congregation — in effect saying to the congregation: “Today you and I received the body and blood of Christ, to strengthen us, to fill us with the power to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ out of these four walls and into the world.”

### **But what do deacons really do? What does the servant ministry look like? How might deacons help to model a servant community for the whole Church?**

The deacon vows to “be guided by the pastoral direction and leadership of the bishop.” The deacon is a person whose faith is recognizable to others, is familiar with Holy Scripture and is grounded in prayer. The deacon is the voice of the oppressed. The deacon is the voice of the prophet in the world and in the Church, interpreting the needs of each to the other.

Deacons are a diverse lot, with a broad range of ministries and abilities. And they share one thing in common: the primary focus of their work is outside the Church building. Most deacons are non-stipendiary — that is, they receive no pay from the Church for their work. Deacons are expected to earn their living by working in the world — in order to stay connected with the needs and realities of that world, and to model servant ministry to the congregation.

Many deacons are middle-aged or older — coming to the servant ministry after years of thought and involvement, seeking a clearer way to serve God. While many deacons are employed in the social services or as chaplains in healthcare, many are business people, teachers, homemakers or retired persons.

When one group of deacons was asked to describe their ministries, a partial list looked like this:

- Organize, run, and work at a variety of ecumenical social service ministries, such as food banks, clothing banks and soup kitchens.
- Organize and direct emergency assistance ministries.
- Provide community leadership on peace and justice issues, forming coalitions and enabling workers.
- Serve as chaplains for community organizations.
- Serve as professional chaplains for hospitals, hospices and nursing homes.
- Serve as college and university chaplains.
- Implement crisis interventions in the workplace.
- Serve as prison chaplains.
- Work as nurses and as school teachers.