

TRILATERAL DIALOGUE ON THE DIACONATE

ANGLICAN – METHODIST – ROMAN CATHOLIC

8-9 May 2019

Held at the Onehunga Co-operating Parish, in Auckland

Notes

Present: Rev Tony Franklin-Ross (Methodist – convenor), The Rev. Deborah Broome (Anglican), The Ven. Nicky Lee (Anglican - deacon), The Rev. Peter Sykes (Anglican - deacon), Deacon Murray Morgan (Catholic - deacon), Deacon Robert Mitchell (Catholic-deacon), Deacon Peter Richardson (Catholic - deacon), Mrs Pat Lythe (Catholic), Sr Dr Sian Owen (Catholic), Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard (Methodist – recorder), Rev Dr Terry Wall (Methodist), Dcn Edna Evans (Methodist - deacon), Dcn Sesi Hafoka (Methodist - deacon).

Apologies: The Rt Rev Kito Pikaahu, The Rev Dr Douglas Pratt, Fr Dr Merv Duffy, Rev Prince Devanandan.

Introductions and Opening questions

The roll call of people present at the gathering quickly revealed an array of questions people already had in mind about the role of deacons in the life of the Church.

- Is the diaconate just another layer of clericalism we can do without?
- What is the essential difference between diaconal and lay ministry?
- Exactly who has a problem with understanding the diaconate?
- How are people given theological formation to be deacons; and sustained in continuing educations and support?
- What does ordination as a deacon add for a person who is already heavily diaconal in their current work and ministry?
- How well have parishes, priests/presbyters, lay people, been prepared to receive the ministry of deacons and thereby been enabled to embrace it?
- How might the role develop in the future?
- Are there cultural issues to be addressed in embracing diaconal ministry?
- Are these observations unique to particular denominational experiences, or have commonality across the denominations?

Session One – early traditions: Fr Dr Merv Duffy was unable at the very last moment to attend and Rev Dr Lynne Wall was also unable to be present, and so Sr Sian presented Fr Merv’s material on his behalf. We looked at the status and role of Phoebe in Romans 16. Our consensus was that she was a designated, ordained deacon, rather than being just one of many “helpers” mentioned in other NT passages. We wondered how much diversity in the role there might have been at this stage across the Early Church – with different patterns in different places.

We also noted that women were clearly still being ordained into diaconal ministry at the time of Chalcedon in AD451. We noted that as deacons were also closely related to bishops, with the expanding Church, the bishop became a distinct Order and was soon vastly outnumbered by presbyters. With the rise of presbyteral ministry in the day to day life of churches, the role of deacons was gradually eclipsed, eventually becoming no more than a transitional ministry Order on the way to priesthood. We noted *Lumen Gentium* #29 which lists the duties of a modern deacon in the Catholic tradition and how that opened up diaconal ministry to married men, but the take-up across the dioceses of the Catholic world has been patchy: Some resisting the development in the hope that women would soon be eligible for ordination, others because it was perceived as rising clericalism.

Session Two – reflections from a Roman Catholic diaconal experience: Deacon Peter Richardson then explained something of the role of deacons in his diocese (Palmerston North/Hamilton). We noted the different language used; for some it is deaconate, for others, diaconate. For Peter it is, 'Rev Mr', for Anglicans 'the Revd' and for Methodists 'deacon' or 'Dcn'. Not all Catholic dioceses in New Zealand have established vocational deacons, so the Order lacks a national focus and flavour. There is not a national formation programme or guidelines. There are 4 men currently in formation which takes 3 years of study. Deacons are largely non-stipendiary and work in their secular employment alongside their church duties. Supervision and spiritual direction are somewhat lacking for Catholic deacons. Peter offered this definition: "The role of the deacon is to enhance and empower the role of the laity."

In some situations, deacons lack any real focus for their work, which isn't helpful. Sometimes, lay people actually feel disempowered by the appointment of deacons, despite Peter's definition above. Deacons play a much more visible role in the life of the Catholic Church in the USA, but there they appear to us to have a very significant weighting towards a liturgical role and it is acknowledged that this remains a tension in the deployment of deacons within the Catholic tradition – where the social, outreach work of deacons is not strongly supported, the liturgical role of deacons can take over and that can lead to the perception of clericalism in some people's view. Reflection on appropriate formation of deacons also requires adequate formation for priests and laity (especially for parishes received deacons) particularly around role confusion, and also articulating the difference between the baptismal vocation of all the baptised compared to ordained deacons.

Session Three – an Anglican history and theology of the Diaconate: The Rev Deborah Broome led this session, looking at the liturgies of the Reformation period which identified the role as helping the priest with liturgical matters such as reading Scripture, teaching catechumens, baptizing babies, and occasionally being permitted to preach. By 1662 the diaconate was seen as a transitional Order on the way to priesthood.

In the 1950s vocational deacons began to appear, starting in the Anglican/Episcopal Church in the USA. This was endorsed by Lambeth in 1968 when the Order was also opened to women. The earlier role of Deaconess (a common form of ministry for women in several Protestant traditions from the mid-nineteenth century onwards) was absorbed into the new vocational Order of Deacons. The deaconess order dates from 1848 and then in London from 1861. These women were largely community based, rather than having a liturgical focus. Not all deaconesses were happy about moving into the new Order of Deacons and deaconess orders do still exist in some parts of the Anglican world. Deacons belong to the House of Laity – again, that proximity of role between deacons and the lay is evident.

In New Zealand, the deaconess order was absorbed into the vocational diaconate in 1970, with some later going on to become priests from 1977. Both transitional deacons and vocational deacons co-exist within the Anglican Church and are ordained using the same liturgy. The deacon does have some liturgical role in comparison with the former deaconess order and deacons may read scripture, administer the chalice, dismiss the people at the end of the Eucharist as well as be engaged in community based ministry.

Snapshots from some Anglican deacons included that of “dancing on the edge”, “outward facing and community involved”.

Session Four - reflections from an Anglican experience: The Rev Peter Sykes told us of his work in South Auckland. Peter addressed the question, ‘why would anyone want to be a deacon?’ He said that deacons, by dint of their ordination and official representative and canonically accountable role were often able to go to places where the lay person might not be allowed to go and take on representative roles that a local lay volunteer might not be allowed to take on (‘allowed’ meaning, accepted by the community).

Peter talked about the sense of how the deacon works at the margins – both in relation to the community and the Church. To the community a deacon is just a religious person (making little distinction between deacon and presbyter) and in today’s secular world that puts you on the edge, but a deacon is often misunderstood and viewed with some suspicion even by church people at times. The image of the deacon circling the lip of a cup, balancing between the interior Church and the exterior community was an enticing image. Peter also suggested the diaconate is about the Church reaching out into the community and said that salt is best when it is spread about. Diaconal work is about spreading the salt of the Gospel in the world. The best place for a deacon to sit in church from a symbolic perspective is not near the altar, but by the church door.

Peter acknowledged that diaconal ministry is just one form of Christian outreach into the world. It is a symbol of the Church’s call into the world, but that does not mean it is the only such symbol, for the whole people of God are so called. Peter offered his definition: “The Church exists to promote Christian living, not enclose it and lock it away from the world.”

However, Peter feels that often the deacon is visible in the community, whilst being invisible to the Church, but where they do function they can serve as symbols of prophetic justice and Christian compassion – the ministry is not exclusively about servanthood – prophetic presence is part of the work too. However, just as we should not allow the ministry of presbyters and bishops to eclipse the role of the deacons, we also need to be careful not to allow the ministry of deacons to eclipse the role of the laity in the world. The Deacon (ordained) is not the only the only deacon or person doing diakonia in a parish or the community. Conversely, many are passionately engaged in diakonia work and community service, why become a deacon if it is not a ministry well embraced within the church?

Session Five- reflections from a Methodist experience: Dcn Edna Evans spoke of the deacons of the Methodist Church. The vocational deacons were established in 1976 with the dream of every parish having both a presbyter and a deacon in due course. That did not eventuate.

Only 34 have ever served in that role, but four of them have received the QSM award for service to the community. Currently there is one in half-time stipended ministry, two without appointment, three work in particular contexts (one with elderly, one in rural ministry, one with Pacifica people); eight in active retirement. Recruitment is difficult for this non-stipendiary work. Most deacons are focused on community based work; and have no prescribed liturgical function (though an expectation is for Prayers for the Community and World to be given by the Deacon, and to be at the church door noting who were in need of care etc). Some may also be Lay Preachers, but that is irrespective of their diaconal status. Experience says that 10% of a deacons time needs to be church based for personal wholeness.

Ministry covenants are required to help define the work of a deacon, hours, where responsibilities lie – in order that they work comfortably with presbyters and lay people. There is a national Diaconal Task Group to give a network and support for the deacons; and a number of national church boards and committees (e.g. Faith and Order, Mission Resourcing) have particular representative membership from the Diaconal Task Group.

Session Five- a Methodist theology of the Diaconate: Rev Dr Terry Wall presented a paper addressing the theological underpinnings of the diaconate from a Methodist perspective. Kenotic theology from Philippians 2 and the foot-washing service of Christ form the scriptural basis of the diaconate, alongside the famous passage in Acts 6. Terry offered his definition: “Deacons focus the diaconal/serving call of the Church in the same way as presbyters/bishops symbolize the sacramental and kerygmatic calling of the Church. The diaconate is a parallel and complementary form of ordained ministry alongside lay ministry of the baptized.”

The task of the deacon is to discern the needs of the community and bring those concerns back to the Church to tell the world's stories of need and suffering to enable the Church to respond. In this sense deacons are sometimes referred to as exercising a bridging ministry between the Church and the world. Terry referred to deacons as "pioneers of mission," but this does not replace the role of the laity who exercise their baptismal calling in the world. The servant ministry is an essential part of the Church's calling, but it is not the whole sum of that mission. In the words of Kenneth Leach: "The Church is more than servant, but it must never become less than so."

The mid-nineteenth century order of deaconesses was encompassed into the new Order of Deacons in the 1970s, but that was not without some sense of loss on the part of some of the deaconesses, who felt a special Order/fellowship had somehow been replaced with something that felt somewhat different.

Whereas deacons in the Catholic and Anglican traditions regularly perform baptisms and in the Catholic tradition, weddings also, in the Methodist Church deacons rarely perform baptisms or weddings - unless by special dispensation from Conference or by secular registration as a celebrant.

Where to from here?

The Anglicans organise a National Deacons' School; currently hosted in Christchurch (involving a weekend series of events; followed by an optional continuing education programme during the following week). Some Methodist deacons already attend by invitation. It was suggested that an invitation could be extended perhaps to Catholic deacons too; and become a broad invitation across the three denominations.

We agreed that the nature of our conversation needs to be shared with our respective church authorities, especially to bishops and priests. We would encourage their involvement in continuing this Trilateral Dialogue.

A report of this Trilateral Dialogue will be given to the National Dialogue for Christian Unity, as well as the respective ecumenical committees of the three denominations, and the Bilateral Dialogues.

Whilst we saw the sheer diversity and a little confusion about diaconal ministry both within each denomination and between denominations, we did wonder whether an element of confusion will always be part of the picture for those who work at the edge. Perhaps a degree of confusion is therefore to be welcomed?



Attendees of the Trilateral Dialogue.

Appendices:

Copies of presentations

- “Permanent Deacons – The Catholic tradition” (Merv Duffy)
- “The Diaconate – an Anglican perspective” (Deborah Broome)
- “Deacons – Pioneers of Mission: NZ Methodist experience” (Terry Wall)

Other papers

- “Wrestling with diaconate” (Paul Avis)