

Deacons of Word and Service

THE VISION STATEMENT OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND DIACONATE

Church of Scotland Diaconate
JANUARY 2018

Introduction to Deacons of Word and Service

Deacons have served the Church of Scotland for many years through a calling to the Diaconate. We believe that at this time of change and challenge in the Church the Ministry of the Diaconate: the Ministry of Word and Service, is a pivotal one for the church; it is a ministry which is well placed to interpret the Church to today's society, and interpret society to today's Church. It is with this in mind that we have set out a vision for a renewed and invigorated Diaconal Ministry: the Ministry of Word and Service.

Diaconal ministry

The Ministry of Word and Service embodies two key values. The first is that it is a ministry of "Being" and second that each Deacon is trained a high level.

A Deacon's ministry of "Being". It models the integration of life and faith, as such it is understood to be a lifelong commitment. This calling compels Deacons to follow the Rule of Life, with its focus on the Word and meeting with others for mutual support in local groups. A Deacon serving the church brings with them their own faith and walk with God. The Call on those who serve as Deacons is very strong, having been tested through the Church selection process. As part of an ordained, authorised ministry within the church, Deacons bring a high level of commitment and experience to both the Church and the community.

Working within the context of theological reflection Deacons make great use of contextual and practical theology in their work. As theologically trained individuals, the Church can be confident in allowing the Deacon to serve and to represent the Church by leading worship, celebrating marriage, conducting

funerals; being involved in Christian education and participating in the courts and functions of the Church at large.

Our Vision is that the Church will recognise the Diaconate as a pivotal ministry, well equipped to serve the Church in the 21st Century. This is the case in churches around the world and has been over the centuries.

History of Deacons on the Church of Scotland

As far back as 1645, the General Assembly makes mention of a role for Deacons within the Church of Scotland. It was not until 1888 that a fresh vision for an Order of Deaconesses was passed by the Assembly. Rev. Professor Archibald Charteris had a vision for a ministry of women in the Church of Scotland to work in practical ways in the communities in which they were deployed. They were to be “the highest type of bible woman”,¹ trained for the purpose. It was a bold move at the time and one which caused him to face ridicule from some of his fellow ministers. After a great deal of perseverance from Charteris, the first Deaconess was set apart in 1888. Almost 100 years later in 1987 Lay Missionaries were incorporated into the Diaconate making it also open to men. In 1992 Deacons were integrated into the courts of the church and in 2002 Deacons were finally ordained as Charteris had first envisioned, though his hope for a Deacon serving alongside a Minister in every parish is, as yet, far from realised.

Why now?

This document is a response to the changing context of ministry and church. Since the “Deacons of the Gospel” report (2001) the needs of church and society have greatly changed. Increased secularisation has left a gap between the

¹ BIOGRAPHY OF Archibald Hamilton Charteris, p35

Church and the communities in which it sits. In recent years, we have seen a rise in “Fresh Expressions of Church” and our understanding of the “Invisible Church” has developed. Deacons have consistently been working on the margins of church and society for, so find it natural to be bridge builders meeting people where they are and developing new forms of ministry and worship. Deacons describe this as “growing where we are planted”.

Why Word and Service?

Within the Church of Scotland, there are two strands of distinctive ordained ministry: Ministry of Word and Sacrament and Diaconal Ministry. The Shepherding and Teaching role of the Minister of Word and Sacrament is widely understood, so in presenting this relatively new term “Ministry of Word and Service” we hope to help the Church understand the essential elements of the role of Deacon. In using the term Word and Service, it becomes clearer that the foundation for both ministries lies in the Word of God and that where the sacramental role is pivotal for Ministers, the role of service is equally so for Deacons. Therefore, both ministries are equal and complementary as responses to the Word of God.

In his book, *The Ministry of a Deacon*, Aitchison writes “Calvin’s definition is one of the few that has real claim to be theology. He characterised Presbyterian Ministry as being the fulfilment of the commandment of Jesus in Mark 12:30, which he sees as relating to worship, with the Diaconal Ministry as the fulfilment of the second commandment, Mark 12:31, an expression of love or charity.”²

² Ronnie Aitchison, *The Ministry of a Deacon*, (Epworth Press, 2003,) p83

The ministry of Deacons is one of collaboration, working with those who are ordained and set apart to proclaim the Gospel not just by what we do but by who we are. Therefore, “Team working is not an optional exercise for the Diaconate, it is a core skill, critical to the distinctive ministry of the Diaconate.”³

Deacons also facilitate the whole people of God. In many ways, Deacons are released from the constraints that are placed on their colleagues in Parish Ministry enabling them to have the time to nurture individuals and groups. “It is a ministry that enables others also to do ministry.”⁴ By modelling service, they walk alongside others in an enabling and encouraging role. They help people to respond to the Word of God through serving their congregations and communities in ways that bring glory to God. The importance of this role is reflected by the Apostle Paul: “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ..” (Ephesians 4 v 11-13)

In the Deacons of the Gospel report, the theological understanding of the call to diaconal ministry was based on an interpretation of Jesus’ words: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) to indicate a call to service. However, recent biblical scholarship suggests a wider interpretation of the Greek word “diakonos” to include an understanding of Deacon as “spokesperson, envoy, courier, go-between entrusted with important tidings, ambassador, mediator,

³ ibid

⁴ Deacons of the Gospel 2001, 2.3.4

person commissioned to carry out a task and act on behalf of a person in authority and as attendants within a household, on whose behalf a Deacon performs various tasks which are not limited to waiting at tables..."⁵ Having been called, selected, trained and ordained, the Deacon acts as an authorised agent of the church in whatever context they are serving.

Images of Diaconal Ministry

In order to provide a picture of what the Ministry of Word and Service as it is exercised today, and how it may serve the Church in the future, we offer the following images. These images do not occur in isolation but connect with one another to embody the Ministry of Word and Service.

Rooted in the Bible the Ministry of Word and Service is a ministry which stands both within and out-with the Church to serve the needs of all people. It is missional, pastoral, prophetic, community orientated, educational, and collaborative. Each Deacon serves differently but with a strong central calling to share the Word of God and serve the people who God has called them to. The Ministry of Word and Service seeks to make the Church relevant to the people outside of its walls and to touch them with the love of Christ.

Deacon as Apostle

The Ministry of the Deacon is at its core a ministry for the community, given by the Church. As such this ministry may be described as Apostolic, that is extending the Word to the community. It seeks to discern the needs of a community, to go where those needs are, fill the gaps and provide ongoing leadership and service. It is creative and dynamic. As a ministry based in the

⁵ Rosalind Brown, "Being a Deacon today" (Canterbury Press, 2008), p.13.

Parish Church the Deacon is released to invest time and skills in work outside of the church's life and to engage members and non-members in this work. Through this, the Church shows a ministry of love to their community.

With this understanding, a renewed and invigorated Diaconate will increasingly lead individuals and congregations into active mission and outreach to their local community. As Apostle, the Deacon bring Christ's message of Love and Forgiveness to those out with the church.

Deacon as Servant

We have already alluded to Mark 10:45 and Christ's servant ministry. Jesus spent much of his time with the undesirables of his day: the sinners and outcasts, much to the horror of religious leaders (Mark 2:16,17). This loving and compassionate ministry was always prompted by the needs of the many and he used the opportunities this gave to encourage faith and trust in God.

Jesus spoke of the consequences facing those who do not meet the needs they see around them (Matt 25:45). His teaching and actions included a call to serve others. Deacons have no monopoly on service for it is a characteristic of all Christian ministry but it is the clear focus of diaconal ministry to embody the pattern that Christ has set for our lives (Phil 2:6-7). As Servant, the Deacon embodies Christ call for the church to show His love and compassion. This is shown most strongly in Pastoral Care. The basin and the towel are common images of the Diaconal ministry reflecting the servant ministry of Jesus recorded by John in his gospel.

Deacon as Bridge

David Bosch has called Mission: “The Church-crossing-frontiers-in-the-form-of-servant.”⁶ The Deacon as a bridge reminds the people of God of their call to cross over between church and community in both directions.

From the earliest history of the Church (Acts 6), the work of the Deacon began to reach beyond the Christian Community into the area of social need. This continues today in the modern Diaconate. “The Deacon as a community servant needs to be operating firmly within the context of the witness of the whole church, and one Christian community in particular.”⁷ While all Deacons are members of a local congregation those engaged in parish work often have particular responsibility for carrying out liturgical functions; working with church members; partnering with community organisations and giving care to those in need in both the local church and community.

Other Deacons serve in different contexts today: chaplaincy, teaching, Crossreach, Iona Community... Whilst this work may limit direct involvement with church members the deacons call in this context is to serve as Christ served and to build bridges between these specialised institutions and the wider community. Both types of Diaconal ministry involve bridge building, meeting people where they are, showing the risen Christ and inviting others to share the journey of faith. These diaconal roles are engaged in Community Development based on networking and community engagement. Deacons today want to encourage church members to view the Deacon as working alongside them in obeying Christ’s command to love and serve their neighbour.

⁶David Bosch “Witness to the world” (Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1980) p.248

⁷ A Strategy for the Church’s Ministry (C.I.O. 1983) para 186, p112

Deacon as Prophet

Theological training, practical community based work and experience of the World Church gives Deacons a prophetic imperative. In this they call the Church locally and nationally to address the needs of others. They are the interface between the church and the community. In this prophetic voice, the call for the people of God to serve the church, community and world is also given. This may be communicated in weekly worship, traditionally prayers of intercession, or through Christian Education. This Prophetic voice may also be exercised in the preaching of the Word when required. Beyond the church the Deacon speaks to places of power on behalf of those who have no power, the Deacon advocates for those in most need.

The Diaconate believe that the church is at its most Christ-like when she sits alongside the poorest and most disadvantaged in our society, speaking for those without power, without a voice. In line with Charteris' vision, the majority of Deacons have worked in areas of multiple deprivation, working at the margins of society, and amongst the most vulnerable. Deacons are well placed to be the spark which brings about the renewal of mission in the church.

Deacons are also well placed to share in ecumenical and international discussions and ministry through strong links with World Diakonia, Diakonia Region Africa Europe and Kaire. Each of these is an opportunity for the Deacon to meet with those from other countries and churches to share and understand how they are serving God in their context. Through these links Deacons hear directly of news and concerns from the world church and are able to share this concern with their local congregations. This International focus also shows how

Deacons seek to collaborate ecumenically with our brothers and sisters from other Churches.

Deacon as Collaborator

The nature of Diaconal ministry is collaborative. Deacons are trained and deployed to work in teams. Teams, normally formed with a Minister of Word and Sacrament and other church staff, are ideally complementary allowing each member to play to their strengths. At its best the team should reflect the collaborative nature of the Trinitarian God. As a collaborator, the Deacon exercises this key skill within a team, whether in a parish, in a community or in an ecumenical setting.

Deacons will seek to form teams with those who are willing to collaborate and as such these teams could be with para-church organisations or other groups. These teams are part of the Apostolic nature of the Deacon's work.

Conclusion

This fresh definition of Diaconal Ministry as one of Word and Service clearly reflects its distinctive nature. It is offered with the prayer that in defining this ministry other recognised ministries will be encouraged to reclaim and celebrate theirs. It is also offered that all in the church might move towards a richer understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God.