

## The Ministry of Deacons in the Lutheran Church

Deacons are new to many Lutheran churches in America. Here we offer an overview of the call to be a deacon, how deacons are trained, how they minister, their relationship with their pastors and churches, and hindrances to accepting the Biblical office of deacon as a valid ministry in the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod (LCMS). These observations come from my experience as pastor of a congregation which has deacons and as an instructor in the leadership training program of the Pacific Southwest District for 16 years.

### ***A Calling***

Deacon is a calling much like pastor is a calling. Two Bible passages, 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Philippians 1:1 (addressing the church "with the bishops and deacons") outline this biblical office, which is placed on par with overseers (bishops), elders and pastors. People take the ten classes in our district's Lay Leader Training program in order to serve more effectively in their churches, to grow in understanding, or to become deacons. I do not press those who have completed all classes to be certified as deacons, because not all are called to this. Those who are called to be deacons sense an inner call (as Paul did), meet personal qualifications as detailed in 1 Timothy 3, are examined by synod officials and called by their congregations. This is like the three part "proper call" (Augsburg Confession XIV) of a pastor: examination by synod appointees, call by a congregation, and ordination by representatives of synod.

### ***Deacon Training***

Deacons often are as or more effective than pastors in ministry. New seminary graduates are often 20-something in age, and lack the maturity of deacons who are commonly over 40 years old and have more experience in church leadership and teaching. Deacons often better meet the qualifications of 1 Tim 3. Deacons have served longer in individual churches than young pastors

and provide more continuity in ministry, which benefits the congregations. Often they pick up the pieces left behind when inferior pastors leave.

Because lay leaders have church experience, I approach my courses like seminar classes, emphasizing discussion, questions and problem solving. I assume the students are already dealing with challenges and struggles of ministry and faith and help them to better understand and confront them.

Leader training classes have two thrusts. One is *knowledge*, which is emphasized in information-based classes such as New Testament, Old Testament, Doctrine and Church History. The other is *ministry skill*, which is emphasized in classes such as Leadership, Evangelism and Assimilation, Caregiving, Teaching, Preaching and Worship.

Our district requires 18 class hours per course, but my classes typically include 21-27 class hours. Homework and field work are also required. In order to be certified, candidates must verify that they have carried out about two dozen ministry tasks such as teaching confirmation, visiting the sick and meeting with new church members. The Northwest district offers classes online in association with Concordia University.

One benefit of classes is cross-fertilization. We learn from each other, help each other through challenges and give mutual support. This is often more transparent or honest than pastoral circuit meetings which sometimes have an undercurrent of church politics or competition. Our district offers deacons ongoing education through annual conferences and regional meetings. Some deacons also attend pastoral conferences. Pastors not only serve as instructors, but provide ongoing counsel to deacons, who are often more receptive to it than new pastors.

Deacons and assisting pastors develop a network across the district. Men in different areas learn from and support each other.

Deacon guidelines require that a nearby pastor and the district president (DP) provide oversight, which prevents deacons from getting off track and provides counsel. The DP also renews (or declines to renew) deacons' licenses yearly.

Training programs in different districts are much the same. This is because they are all based on the detailed guidelines in Resolution 3.05B which was approved by the synod in convention in Wichita in 1989. This synodical direction adds continuity and order to deacon training across synod, along with quality and consistency in ministry.

### ***What Do Deacons Do?***

Our district emphasizes that a deacon's ministry is developed in discussion by the deacon, oversight pastor (which may be pastor of the deacon's or a neighboring congregation) and the congregation he serves. This takes into account the church's needs and his unique gifts and training. This common agreement makes the deacon's ministry more effective. Deacons may specialize in caregiving, teaching, worship, preaching, youth, family, leadership or any other area of church ministry. All ministry is done to assist, and in concert with, the pastors and elders.

Most discussion in synod focuses on deacons who preach, baptize and/or consecrate the Lord's Supper. Synod in convention in 1989 authorized districts to train, examine, qualify and license deacons to do this kind of ministry. Although ten districts credential deacons, *the wider church recognizes and uses licensed deacons to preach* and pastor churches. Fully 27 of the 35 districts (77%) have preaching deacons, and 20 have deacons doing Word and sacrament.

Deacons are trained to do these kinds of ministry, but the pastors, deacons and congregations agree on their ministry, which may or may not include preaching.

Pastors find that, with very few exceptions, deacons respect and defer to their pastors *more* after training than they did before. This shows that they take seriously the personal character that 1 Timothy 3 requires of deacons and the training which helps them see the challenges and problems of pastoral ministry.

### ***How Congregations Respond to Deacons***

Congregations respond very well to deacons, particularly if they are taught about the ministry and Biblical office of deacons. My congregation studied the issue and wrote an appendix to our constitution which detailed our approach to deacons so that everyone was well informed and in agreement. Pastors and church leadership often need learn about this, because deacons have been little known in American Lutheranism.

On the whole, congregations honor the training, interview process and credential provided by our district's Lay Leader Training program. Synodical officers (district and vice presidents) examine candidates, and many synodical officers (circuit visitors and vice presidents) teach classes. Churches honor this official recognition of their deacons.

Most pastors and congregations find it valuable to have deacons preach when their pastors are unavailable. Preaching not like lecturing or college seminars. The strength (or sometimes weakness) of preaching is the relationship the people have with the preacher and their respect for him. They seldom have this with a new or substitute pastor from outside the church, so deacons are commonly more effective even if their skills may not be as developed as those of experienced pastors (some deacons are *more* capable).

There is some overlap and similarity in ministry between deacons and pastors, as there is between DCEs and pastors. However, in an educated church there is no confusion, because they know the difference in calling, training and responsibilities.

Deacons are especially helpful in churches which are not served by seminary trained pastors. Churches have trouble finding pastors when they are ethnic, small, big, remote, poor or urban. Pastors often do not live close by, or are unable to serve in another culture, or do not want to serve churches which cannot pay them full time. Deacons fill the gap especially in districts which are strongly multi-ethnic (like southern California) or with large distances between congregations (like the northwest and Alaska).

The need for deacons will grow, not decline in coming years. Many congregations across the country are shrinking as the size of synod shrinks, and more will be unable to afford full time pastors.

The synod has been desperately warning us about the severe decline in the number of pastors very soon as baby boomers retire. While synod tries to increase the number of men entering seminary, it has been strangely silent about the part deacons can play in making up the shortfall.

Deacons fill gaps in pastoral ministry. They sometimes serve an ethnic part of a congregation while the pastor serves the Anglo part. They provide caregiving, private communion and other personal services to people that the pastor has no time to reach in large churches. Deacons have gifts their pastors do not and can serve more effectively in certain areas of ministry.

Deacons serve well at transitional times when pastors leave churches. They provide a continuity of ministry better than interim pastors can provide alone.

Deacon training also serves to bring men into seminary-trained pastoral ministry. Most men enter leadership training not even expecting to be commissioned as deacons. The training and ministry experience lead many men to find a calling as deacon, and others to discover a calling to be a pastor. These men then go on to regular seminary or distance Special Ministry Pastor (SMP) training. Most of these men would not have become pastors without the stepping stone of deacon training.

### ***The Pastoral Bottleneck***

If the ministry of deacons is like fine wine, pastors are like bottlenecks. They can be "wide mouth," facilitating ministry, "narrow neck," hindering ministry, or "corks" which prevent it.

Deacons feel blessed and are very effective when pastors encourage their ministry, and very frustrated when they hinder ministry. Some deacons in our area have seen supportive pastors leave and restrictive pastors come. This is very frustrating, because God-given ministry is hindered, their call is ignored and people receive less help.

When Apostle John criticized a minister who was "not one of us" Jesus answered, "do not hinder him" (Luke 9:50). Paul said of Phoebe, "receive her in the Lord... give her any help she may need" (Rom 16:2). We pastors need to be more willing to admit how much pride, desire for control and defending our turf affects our "theology" of deacons and how much we restrict them. We are often seduced by hearing the

phrase "The Office of the Holy Ministry" (which is not a biblical term) so often that we don't notice how much it builds our pride at the expense of other church leaders.

The Holy Spirit wants to multiply ministry. "Pray for laborer" applies to deacons as much as it does to pastors. This is inhibited when the spotlight falls so narrowly on pastors.

The apostle Paul constantly enlarged ministry by adding new believers such as Timothy, Titus, Gaius and Aristarchus to his ministry team. They became Paul's coworkers within a year or two of baptism, having much less time in faith and learning than deacons. Paul delegated authority to them to speak for him and choose elders.

District leadership is also important, because it helps enable or blocks deacon training and certification.

It seems that some synodical officials and pastors want to eliminate or at least control deacon training. It appears that they want to stipulate every detail of training, classes and practice. This would hinder training rather than improve it. The grassroots nature of deacon training (if you can fairly call district-wide training "local") is one of the strengths of the training. Local instructors tune the classes to local community, church and student needs and to their unique strengths as teachers.

It is ironic that synodical officials who don't micromanage the teaching of college and seminary professors may want to do so with pastors who are synod-trained and frequently have doctorates and other advanced degrees and more parish experience (and deacon-training experience) than most professors do. It is inaccurate and insulting to infer that experienced, educated pastors are incapable of teaching basic courses on the Bible and pastoral ministry without detailed synodical instruction.

The Christian church at large has offices like that of Lutheran deacons, though they go by a variety of names. They all do aspects of pastoral ministry, including preaching and usually baptism and consecrating the Lord's Supper. They all require training, personal qualifications according to 1 Timothy 3, examination and credentialing. This shows need in the Church and widespread prompting by the Holy Spirit.

### **Traditions Which Hinder Deacon Ministry**

Several church practices and traditions hinder deacon ministry. Some are helpful to ministry in some ways but hinder ministry in other ways. Strengths have built in weaknesses.

**Academics.** Currently the Synod expects pastors to have master's degrees, although this was not the case a generation ago. The full seminary experience requires master level academics. This is mostly useful knowledge, but the expectation that all leaders need this to be effective hinders expansion of ministry. This is an especially large problem for second career men who do not have college degrees or ethnic pastors who know little English. (I once had a seminary room mate who was incapable of carrying on simple conversations in English, yet expected to produce master's level academic work.) Deacons have a working knowledge of ministry though it is not comprehensive. However, seminary-trained pastors do not have a comprehensive knowledge of ministry either. They realize this throughout their lives as they come upon demands of ministry new to them, social trends which were not addressed at seminary and skills which academics cannot form. On the whole, daily pastoral work is simple. Love God, love your neighbor as yourself, and teach the plainly-stated words of the Bible.

**Catholic Priesthood.** The view that priests have special powers seems to have been implicitly carried over into the Lutheran concept of The Office of the Holy Ministry. Theology thinks of them as having unique spiritual power to cause blood to be present in wine or absolve sins. Spiritual power and ministry calling are seen as all embodied in one seminary trained man, as though his voice and hands are Christ's voice and hands. If not for Martin Stephan, the LCMS may still be led by a bishop and convention delegates would be only clergy. While the God-given calling as overseer/ pastor is real, remnants of the priesthood idea may hinder ministry by other church leaders and create a kind of pride pastors have trouble seeing in themselves.

**Lutheran Confessions.** While the Lutheran Confessions mention deacons, they do not describe them, leading some people to conclude that we are better off if we don't have deacons at all. The LC spoke to issues which arose in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, not to those which arose later. The LC had little

knowledge of or need to address atheism, world mission, deacons, the rapture, dispensationalism, and Baptist notions of "believer's baptism." It doesn't explicitly describe details of baptism, spell out the parts of the Divine Service, or define district president or DCE, yet we do not decline to use them. Gaps in confessions are not meant to be prohibitions. Because deacons are not described doesn't mean we cannot develop them, informed by Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the "proper call" of AC IX can very well apply to the Biblical call to be deacon. Levels of ordination already exist in SMP and GMP.

### **More Information**

There are two important sources of synodical information on licensed deacons. The 1989 Wichita Resolution 3-05B authorized districts to train and license deacons. Its five pages provide detailed recommendations for deacon ministry and are the blueprint all district training programs follow. It is based on the detailed Lay Worker Study Committee Report which was authorized in 1986. Both are found in the 1989 convention *Proceedings* (*Resolutions* and *Synodical Reports* sections). The resolution is also found in Appendix A of *Policies of the Commission on Deacon Qualifications* by the Michigan District (p12, [ww.michigandistrict.org](http://ww.michigandistrict.org)). Authorizing laymen to preach predates Wichita: seminarians did so, and others did so under 1986 Handbook Bylaw 6.97.

*Controversy on Deacons in The LCMS and The "Whole Church" Dimension of Deacons in the LCMS* evaluate the 2015 synodical task force report on licensed deacons. They answer objections to deacons, compares deacons to other synodical auxiliary offices, shows how licensing provides order, shows how deacons are accepted and certified by the wider church, and addresses the central points of the task force's report. Video presentations based on those essays and this paper are available.

- Rev. Dr. John P. Juedes, Highland CA 2016  
[messiah7@empirenet.com](mailto:messiah7@empirenet.com)

(these views do not necessarily reflect those of the Lay Leader Training program or officials of the Pacific Southwest District of the LCMS; *Controversy on Deacons in The LCMS and The "Whole Church" Dimension of Deacons in the LCMS* are available in print by email; videos are on DVD or YouTube)