

CONTROVERSY On DEACONS In The LCMS

BACKGROUND

Key "Problem" (or is it a blessing?):

Unordained men serving in pastoral capacity (preaching and sacraments) in churches when pastors are unavailable, unwilling or unable to fully meet ministry needs

ANSWERS to the Situation:

- a) *Ignore*, b) *criticize*, c) *train* (LLT), d) *credential and oversee* (PSWD), e) *require expensive seminary training and eliminate those who don't* (LCMS task force)

RECENT LCMS HISTORY

+ 1989 convention Res. 3-05B approves district licensing for men who preach, baptize and consecrate the Lord's Supper. Its 5 pages of detailed recommendations based on the Lay Worker Study Committee Report become the blueprint all programs follow

+ every national convention: resolutions for and against; training prospers in about 11 of 35 districts; 2 districts want to add program (2015)
+ 2015 LCMS Task Force (TF) produces report
+ 2016 convention to approve, adapt or reject TF recommendations

TASK FORCE REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

While TF members are sincere (appointed by Pres. Harrison), it included no members with long experience in training, commissioning, overseeing and developing a theology of deacons, which unsurprisingly produced anti-deacon results.

+ no new preaching deacons after Jan 1, 2018
+ terminate deacon licenses and the position of deacon July 1, 2018
+ make it easier for some current deacons to be ordained by increasing the number eligible for colloquy (committees would determine what classes and work they need to be ordained as Special Ministry Pastors [SMP])

+ prohibit lay training programs from including training leading to licensing as deacons
+ allow only ordained clergy to preach

OBSERVATIONS On The TF'S KEY ARGUMENTS

1. *The TF ignores the fact that Deacon is a Biblical office*

Qualifications for both Deacons and bishops are noted side by side in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Philippians 1:1, which are the scriptural foundation for deacons. If bishop is considered an office, deacon should be also. However, the report never quotes these passages and devotes only 9 lines and 1 footnote to Scriptural discussion of deacons, all of which have a negative slant (pp. 6,12). By contrast, it devotes about 120 lines to the role of evangelist, which isn't even pertinent. It advocates that districts create the office of "evangelist assistant" to replace that of deacon. Synod has many nonbiblical "auxiliary offices" such as DCE, yet the TF does not even float the idea of making deacons, which are biblical, an auxiliary office.

Men typically believe that deacon is a *calling* and their congregations agree. Few want to be pastors, and the TF will not be able to persuade them to be "evangelist assistants" instead, because that is not their calling.

2. *While the report discourages an "elitist" view of pastors, it implicitly encourages it while denigrating the position of deacon.*

It constantly uses (and capitalizes) "The Office of the Holy Ministry" and "Office of Preaching" (which are not biblical terms) while using the term "*Lay Deacon*" even though the Scriptural title is simply "deacon." Since the titles bishop and deacon are used back-to-back in 1 Timothy 3:1,8, the term "*Lay Deacon*" is as inaccurate as "*Lay Bishop*." It also uses the secular term "license" not found in Scripture. The TF uses the unbiblical term "laymen serving pastoral" and "mercy (diaconal) work," inordinately confining deacons to mercy ministry. The result of this is to promote the office of pastor while discounting the Scriptural position of deacon.

3. *The report inaccurately claims that deacons are only "locally" certified and are not valid because the "wider church" does not certify them (p.12).*

In fact, the wider church does certify deacons in many ways: the synod at large approved certification of preaching deacons in 1989, (delegating examination to districts, just as synod delegates examination of clergy to seminaries). Districts (in committees made up of officers of synod, a form of the "wider church") examine and certify deacons, not just congregations. Districts which certify deacons informally recognize each other's deacons. Concordia University NY and Oregon train deacons.

The wider church has accepted deacons in much greater numbers than auxiliary offices. The 525 licensed deacons (more than 331 preach) rival the number of DCEs (617) and outnumber all other auxiliary offices combined (total 448 SMP, Deaconess, DPM, DFLM, DCO, PA). District presidents who credential deacons take other "roster" actions recognized by the whole synod such as removing ministers from office and making ministers ineligible for calls. If the "local" nature of SMP and deacon licenses are a problem to some people, synod could easily declare them to be national licenses.

The TF report adds amazing statistics: although ten districts train deacons, deacons preach in 27 districts, and Word and sacrament deacons serve in 20 districts. Some "confessional" churches which oppose training have preaching deacons. *While 30% of districts train preaching deacons, 77% of districts use them.*

4. *The report notes that the "proper call" of clergy is made of three parts- examination by synod appointees, call by a congregation, and ordination by representatives of synod.*

These are exactly the three parts of licensing (placing in office) of deacons carried out by districts. This means that districts of synod apply the same careful approach to certifying deacons that they do to certifying pastors.

The Synod uses the term *ordination* exclusively for clergy, and *commissioning* for auxiliary offices. However, the New Testament does not use such exclusive terminology. The words appoint (ordain) (*kathistamai*), chosen (*cheirotoneo*) and set apart (*aphorizo*) are used fluidly, as are the titles overseer (bishop), elder and pastor. Any of these verbs could be used of appointing pastors, bishops

or deacons. Much of LCMS practice is based more on historical, ecclesiastical and administrative decisions (including IRS status of workers) more than on Biblical practice.

DCEs, elders and church leaders commonly preach in their own churches when their pastors are absent, although they do not have the training, certification and call that deacons have.

5. *The report downplays the fact that pastors do "oversight," implying that deacons should not exist because pastors should not focus on overseeing them, p. 7*

The TF certainly wouldn't downplay the fact that pastors should oversee auxiliary offices like DCEs, deaconesses and Lutheran teachers, and thereby imply that auxiliary offices should not be used. The TF claims that oversight is not the primary function of pastors because it is stated "only 4 times." Would the TF assert that consecrating the sacrament is not the function of pastors because it is never once stated explicitly in the NT?

6. *The report says that there is more confusion and disorder since licensed deacons were approved by synod in 1989*

The opposite is true. Deacon programs have brought order and accountability to the districts that use them. They intentionally train, examine, credential, oversee, provide continuing education and review licenses yearly. They all have a unified approach, patterning their programs after the specific recommendations of the 1989 resolution and DELTO requirements. Ten of the 35 districts train deacons to preach in 2015, and 2 more want programs. In contrast, some districts that do not have deacon programs may have nonclergy preaching informally but have no regular means to train or credential them, which is disorderly.

7. *The report recommends that colloquy be loosened up so more current deacons can be ordained as SMP clergy within 3 years. Then all congregations would have pastors and none would have preaching deacons.*

"Looser" eligibility requirements would still be so strict that a small percentage (less than 20%) could enter colloquy. The TF infers that colloquy may take 1-2 years. This provision is temporary, and its "window" closes Jan 1, 2018. After that point, deacons would not exist and men who are called to

preach would have to take the full SMP program (which requires 4 years, over \$34,000 tuition, 17 courses, trips to seminary and additional expenses, hindering especially older men).

8. *TF recommendations would reverse decisions made by consensus of the whole synod in convention in 1989.*

The 1989 convention approved: districts may train and license deacons to preach, baptize and consecrate. The TF recommends ending this policy which has been followed by many districts over the past 27 years. This would create great upheaval among the hundreds of deacons and congregations which called them. If synod follows TF recommendations it would, in effect, declare the calls of those ineligible for colloquy to be illegitimate and order ministry to cease, causing huge unrest.

9. *The TF offers no ongoing solution to the "problem" of nonclergy preaching and leading congregations in small, poor, remote and culturally diverse churches.*

The TF "fix" is to make it easier to ordain a very small number of deacons in 2018 and 2019. The TF avoids saying what synod repeated says in other settings: a large pastor shortage is coming in the next few years. The TF advocates that churches find pastors using the means of multipoint ("dual") parishes, streaming technology, pastors moving to needy areas, and SMP. These things *already* exist but are not sufficient. Deacons are a biblical, grass-roots solution to congregational needs which other means are unable to meet.

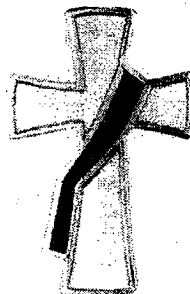
10. *The report claims that people are "confused" because deacons look too much like pastors, so deacons should be eliminated.*

Churches and districts which are knowledgeable of deacons are not confused. They realize that there is overlap between pastors and deacons, just as there is overlap between pastors and DCEs. But churches, deacons and pastors all understand the difference and the biblical basis. Deacons should be explained, not terminated. While some people worry that defining deacons is impossible, we *already* follow a 1989 definition approved by synod

11. *The report concludes: "(we) dare not suppose that our pastors will be the sole solution" (to congregational needs), p.27.*

Actually, it *does* say that pastors are the sole solution to the need for pastoral care. However, the report dares not even consider the possibility that the biblical office of deacon is an effective, God-given way to meet ministry needs. Need will increase in coming years as synod, congregations and number of clergy shrink.

Phillip and Acts 6



Some use Acts 6 to claim that deacons must do acts of service rather than teach and preach. However, since Phillip did miracles, baptized and "preached the things of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12) it would be inaccurate

to say that Philip could not preach in the services of the new church in Samaria because he was ordained as deacon, not as the Office of the Holy Ministry.

Deacons in the Christian Church at Large

There is value in seeing how the Holy Spirit works in the Christian Church at large.

Almost every church body has a form of the biblical office of deacon like that practiced in the New Testament and the LCMS. The titles differ:

- + Baptist- licensed minister
- + Methodist - Local Pastor
- + Presbyterian - Ruling Elder
- + Episcopalian - Perpetual Deacon
- + Roman Catholic – Permanent Deacon
- + Pentecostal – Licensed Preacher
- + Nazarene – Local Minister, District Minister
- + Calvary Chapel – Assisting Pastor
- + Kenyan (and other African) Lutheran - Evangelist
- + Lutheran – Deacon

The term for the process also differs, whether "license" or "ordain." However, the descriptions have *the same characteristics*:

1. Serve in pastoral capacity with pastor (assistant) or alone (substitute for pastor, long or short term)
2. License/ credential after training, personal qualification & interview
3. Preach, do all kinds of pastoral work (some don't do communion, marriage)
4. Supervised by pastor (and church body)

5. If alone in parish (esp small, ethnic), do all pastoral functions

They exist in all kinds of polity and generally rise from the grass roots (not from educational institutions). This shows need in the church and leading of the Holy Spirit across the church.

DEACON NUMBERS

The Church is so responsive to the office of deacon that their numbers are rapidly gaining on or exceeding the number in auxiliary offices:

Deacons (licensed) 525 Deacons who preach 331
Parish Assistant 11 Dir. Of Christian Outreach 21
Dir. Family Life Ministry 25 Dir. Parish Music 61
Deaconess 161 Specific Ministry Pastor 169
Dir. Christian Education (DCE) 617

This amazing growth of deacons in just 27 years recalls Gamaliel's warning: "Leave these men alone... (don't) find yourselves fighting God" (Acts 5). Synod has long recognized the need for auxiliary offices to help with pastoral duties. None of the current auxiliary offices are Biblical offices (though they serve well), while deacon is. What is to hinder the synod from recognizing the Biblical office of deacon as it has nonbiblical offices?

The 1989 Wichita Convention Res. 3-05B

Is maligned by opponents and quoted by supporters, but seldom read. Its 5 pages of detailed rationale and directives can be found in Appendix A of *Policies of the Commission on Deacon Qualifications* by the Michigan District (p12, www.michgiandistrict.org). The Lay Worker Study Committee Report is worth reading, found in the 1989 convention *Proceedings (Synodical Reports)*. Licensing laymen to preach predates Wichita: seminarians do and 1986 Bylaw 6.97.

The best of the TF report is in the small print: deacon is a Biblical office (note 21), Reformation era deacons were ordained clergy, not laymen (note 24), Luther and Walther recognized laymen preaching (p.10), 1 Tim. 3:8-15 quoted.

Augsburg Confession XIV states that those who preach should be properly called. While the Lutheran Confessions mention deacons, they do not describe them. Some people say that the office of deacon is not described in detail in the Bible, and its functions have varied in church history, so it is best not to have them at all. However, the NT does not explicitly describe details of baptism nor

spell out the parts of the Divine Service, nor define district president or DCE, yet we do not decline to use them. The confessions have little to say about world missions, evolution, dispensationalism or liberal methods of exegesis, yet we don't avoid these topics for that reason.

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,

ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Explain how leadership training and deacons are fulfilling the intent** and instructions of the 1989 synodical resolution well. The training, ministry, certification and pastoral oversight all have produced order and fruit in God's kingdom.

2. **Enlarge rather than hinder ministry.** When 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" (Rom16:2). 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.

3. **Teach the biblical rather than the historical or administrative view of deacons.** Clarify confusion due to lack knowledge of deacons and clarify terms... (Deacon, not *lay* deacon)

4. Acknowledge the sincere intent of the synod task force, but **reject its recommendations** as biblically and logically inadequate and **reaffirm deacon ministry.** Encourage convention delegates to support deacon licensing and preaching deacons as has been done effectively since 1989.

5. **Make the Biblical office of deacon an office or auxiliary office** to confirm the Biblical ministry of deacons. Deacons have a legitimate part in teaching God's Word in partnership with pastors. This would be a step beyond current practice of certifying deacons and may not be necessary.

All these tasks will expand ministry and help prepare synod for a dramatic decline in clergy expected in the next decade.

More Information: *this paper*, "The Ministry of Deacons in the Lutheran Church" and "The 'Whole Church' Dimension of Deacons in the LCMS" are available in print (messiah7@emplenet.com) and video on DVD or YouTube

Rev. Dr. John Juedes, Highland CA, 2016 4ed