

Anglican Church of Southern Africa



Report of the Archbishop's Commission on the Ministry of the Distinctive and Permanent Diaconate

April 2024

Note on the Report

This report was prepared for the Archbishop's Commission on the Ministry of the Distinctive and Permanent Diaconate which was set up in late 2022.

A Draft Report was presented to the Provincial Standing Committee in September 2023 and the final Report submitted in April 2024.

Cover illustration: Michael the deacon, who travelled from Ethiopia to Europe and in 1534 met and influenced Luther

To Archbishop Thabo Makgoba

We, the following, hereby present to you for your consideration the final report of the Commission to investigate the Ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate.

We thank you for having entrusted to us this important Commission concerning the future of the right ordering of this diaconal ministry.

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Terminology note

Given the importance of the historical information on the diaconate and its relationship to the other two orders, we have generally preferred to use the term **presbyter** rather than **priest** in accord with New Testament usage. As is well known, no Christian minister is called a priest (*hieros*) in the New Testament and the English word “priest” is a linguistic corruption of the word *presbyteros* (which literally means an **elder**).

Executive summary

A history of the diaconate

1. A thorough study was made of the New Testament, patristic and historical developments up till the present to understand whether the history of the diaconate illuminates the nature of the diaconate. We concluded that the idea that the current three-fold order of Bishop, Presbyter and Deacon somehow accurately represents Biblical or Patristic tradition and practice is misguided. It does not and the idea that we return to a supposed primitive or original diaconate is as anachronistic a venture as is the idea that the present dominant transitional diaconate in any way represents ancient practice. Any restoration of a distinctive diaconate will have to be based on first principles, and that means a better understanding of the concept of *diakonia* and a better theology of the diaconate.
2. This is not to say that the historical evidence does not show the high regard in which the early diaconate was held (epitomised by Ignatius who said that the three fold ministry was an essential sign of the Church: “Apart from these, there is no Church” and from whom we get a sense of the powerful independent role of deacons as ministers in the early church, which in the Western Church withered because of idiosyncratic historical circumstances.
3. It is clear that worldwide there has been a gradual and fruitful restoration of the distinctive diaconate in a number of denominations. The general trend in the Anglican communion is the same.

The meaning of diakonia

4. On the basis of “the recent rediscovery of the biblical idea of *diakonia*” (owing much to the work of the scholar John Collins) it is clear that Act 6:1-7 can no longer be considered an account of the institution of the diaconate. The narrative in Acts 6:1-7, by mistranslation and misinterpretation, has often led to the diaconate being considered an inferior form of ministry (and historically, a cause of the decline of a distinctive diaconate in the West).
5. The *diakon-* words in the New Testament point to diaconal service being done by a commissioned authorised agent (of God or the Church) and covering **all** aspects of Christian ministry and service. The saving work of Jesus and the apostolic mission (and in due course people given the appellation ‘deacon’) were all actions of such commissioned ‘sent’ agents. Deacons, therefore, are not menial ‘soup kitchen’ skivvies, but authorised agents of the Church, engaged in a variety of acts of ministry, the need for which depends upon historical situations. Deacons exemplify the task of ministering to the world and keeping the worshipping community alive to the tasks of *diakonia*.

Towards a contextual theology of the diaconate

6. The recent revitalised understanding of *diakonia* means a moving away from the idea that the diaconate is an inferior order dealing with social welfare activities to free up the other orders of ministry to deal with a more 'spiritual' ministry. The diaconate is now seen as a full, equal, and distinctive order of people attending to the business of *diakonia* under the oversight of the bishop and presbyters in a threshold ministry that brings together liturgy, proclamation and service to the world (as it is believed, it did in the early centuries of the Church), particularly in time of crisis in contemporary society.
7. Many provinces have changed their ordinals to reflect this new theological understanding and questioned the idea of the transitional diaconate.
8. An interesting distinction can be made between the order of the presbyterate as being an order of **continuity** (having care of and celebrating the theology and tradition of the institutional Church and working to help the gathered people of God live and work as part of the Kingdom of God through worship, learning and pastoral care) and the order of the diaconate as an order of **transformation** (being part of a movement to bring the gifts of life, liberation, love and learning and servant leadership to transform society and the world).
9. The new understanding of *diakonia* has unmade the conception of the diaconate as being about an order of servile humility doing soup-kitchen work. The idea of the deacon as **only** doing social work is seen as a dead end, not that sending out of deacons to do precisely social, economic, welfare and justice organising is not to be encouraged, and in the present Southern African context may well be a growing priority.
10. There are current debates about the location of the deacon – in relation to the bishop, and on the relationship between the diaconate and layministers.
11. Any renewal of the diaconate should be grounded on:
 - a theological foundation that must, *inter alia*, be linked to a theology of the baptismal vocation of all, and
 - an understanding of the diaconate's relationship to the orders of presbyter and bishop and to the so-called lay-ministries,
 - must take into account the revised understanding of the meaning of *diakonia* as the activities of mandated, commissioned persons who are operatives of the kingdom who call all people to be servants of the kingdom community:
 - the contextual nature of the ministry.

What should deacons be and do?

12. Various attempts have been made to look at the deacons' job description and either to simplify it or detail it.
13. One simplification is to see the deacon as having both:
 - a **church-facing** enabling and educational role, and
 - a **world-facing** catalytic, intermediary and partnership role.
14. Detailed attempts have been made such as the Theological Education in the Anglican Communion (TEAC) grid to itemize the various competencies deacons should exhibit.

15. With some caution the Commission itemized the potential functions of the deacon thus:

Function	Categories
Proclaimer	Apostolic missionary, Herald of Christ's kingdom
Ikon	Ikon of Christ, Model of servanthood, Minister of service
Worship leader	Liturgical worship leader
Interpreter of needs and situations	Interpreter, Needs reporter
Administrator	
Educator and equipper	Teacher and catechist, Information giver, Equipper
Outreacher	An outwards reaching minister
Liminal/Threshold/Bridge	
Collaborator/Partner/Team worker	
Networker	Connector, Messenger, Ambassador
Prophet and social justice activist	Prophet and social justice activist, Disrupter

The current distinctive diaconate

16. The experiences of the current licensed distinctive deacons in ACSA, and that of some who are already retired, indicate both the difficulties and discrimination deacons have experienced, as well as the tremendous fulfilment they have found in this calling.
17. It is clear that there is profound ignorance about the diaconate inside and outside the church.

Renewing the full diaconal ministry – confronting the dilemmas

18. Current dilemmas that need to be confronted are:
- the distinction between distinctive and transitional deacons
 - the lack of appropriate formation for deacons
 - self-supporting ministers (both deacons and presbyters) being seen as auxiliary resources for occasional use to help out the stipendiary clergy and seen as inadequately theologically educated.
19. Some opposition to a renewal is to be expected and planned for.
20. Creative options for the **deployment of deacons** – episcopal, archdiaconal, team, congregational and religious order – should be explored.

Deacon discernment, training and support

21. The Commission concluded that it was vital (and not only in respect of deacons but also for people called to the priesthood) that there is information (and visible role models) available on the ministry options open to those who are called. Noted was the paucity of such information on ACSA diocesan websites at the present.
22. Deacon selection criteria need to be refined and standardised (informed by models within and outside the Anglican communion) and the evidence expected should include that on Church based activities and leadership.
23. Currently there is no uniformity in what education levels and theological and practical training are required before (and after) ordination. The Commission agreed that a Diploma level theological training was desirable and that the nature of this training needed to be researched and outlined and theological institutions commissioned to provide it. Post ordination training should last at least four years.
24. Support for the ordained distinctive deacon should include that of appropriate deployment, full membership of appropriate church governance bodies, pastoral and spiritual support and linkages to diaconal support bodies and networks.

Consequent actions required with a renewal of the diaconate

25. There should be a general position that deacons should be eligible for both self-supported and church-supported positions (and in the latter they should be on the same stipend scales as presbyters in assistant posts).
26. The gifts, talent, and experience of a deacon should be considered in deployment decisions, as well as the ministry needs of the diocese, a process in which the Diocesan Bishop plays key role.
27. If assigned to a parish, there should be consultation between the bishop, the person in charge of the parish, the church wardens and the deacon. The deacon shall have an annual written letter of agreement with the presbyter, vestry, and bishop.
28. Deacons could preferably serve in ministry teams (and especially those with an outreach focus), staff teams of major parish churches and cathedrals, specialised non-parochial diocesan ministries (including that of Diocesan administrators directly under the oversight of the bishop), and in church and charitable non-profit organisations.
29. The deacon should take a normal part in synods and regional councils, fraternals, etc. (or stand for election to them). Diocesan Acts may need to be amended to deal with the representation of deacons as the voices of deacons need to be heard at these forums.
30. But, to make all this possible and to create an enabling environment for a new group of distinctive deacons, certain actions need to be taken relating to the amending, revising and creating the canons, the liturgy, rules for synodal governance, and in addition some provincial mechanism for supporting the growth of a renewed distinctive diaconate.
31. The ACSA Fellowship of Deacons should be encouraged to continue its work.

Conclusion

32. The Commission, within the context of the call by Provincial Standing Committee to “all dioceses to nurture and promote the ministry of distinctive deacons within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, was instructed to “investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate”.

The Commission made a serious attempt to examine the evidence on the history of the diaconate in the context of a revitalised understanding of the very idea of *diakonia*. What comes out of that investigation is ambiguous in that it is impossible to say “this is what the New Testament means by a deacon” or “the early church had a clear definition of the deacon”. But what is clear is that deacons were named deacons because they were centrally involved in the whole of *diakonia* which, it is now clear, is the whole action of the sent Church including the ministry of the word and organisation of the Church and the activation of its care for others in the world. The sentness to do *diakonia* is not some footnote on the history of the ordained clergy but a call to respond today, in our context, to the divine mission given by the resurrected Lord to his Church.

What this means is that a call for the renewal of a distinctive diaconate is not some anachronistic appeal to the past but rather a challenge to the Church of today to see that the fullness of the Church’s *diakonia*, being sent by God to serve his purposes in the world, is implemented. And we believe that a restored and distinctive diaconate would be vital to that, though it can also be said that a renewal of the presbyterate and the episcopate is also needed.

What excited us was the exploration of the many things that deacons are and can do (as shown in Chapter 4). It is here that we see the transformative ministry that could be exercised by a distinctive diaconate. It is this that impels us to call for a major renewal of the diaconate and all the consequences that flow from such a renewal, which will require determination and courage.

Recommendations

Restore the distinctive diaconate

1. ACSA needs to clarify the distinctiveness of the ministry of deacons, in relation to the other two orders, and in relation to the crisis-ridden context of our times, in which we believe God is calling upon us to revive the diaconal order.
2. There should be a concerted effort to end what is often perceived as the prejudice and discrimination against the diaconate at various levels, and this applies to how transitional deacons are treated.
3. The option of ending the transitional diaconate and ordaining people directly to the presbyterate should be seriously considered.
4. Ordinations services of deacons and presbyters should be separated as far as possible.
5. If the transitional diaconate is retained the period should be lengthened so that transitional deacons can be trained for, and have a real experience of, the diaconate, rather than only be treated as apprentice priests.

Teach about the nature of diakonia and the distinctive diaconate

6. ACSA needs to educate itself anew on its call to *diakonia* and of the place of ordained deacons in galvanizing this ministry.
7. The Province needs to be educated on the nature and role of the distinctive diaconate.
8. Study material on this report should be generated and distributed.

Settle on an interim discernment and training process

9. The urgent creation of relevant vocational discernment and training information, processes and resources is required.
10. That the Commission or some other body be asked to continue the work done by this Commission, with representatives from theological training institutions and diocesan diaconal training programmes, to develop recommendations on a curriculum and programme for the education and training of deacons.

Establish a provincial support mechanism for the renewal of the diaconate

11. A person should be appointed to a provincial position to oversee the renewal of the distinctive diaconate and their education and training, and wherever possible, this should be echoed at diocesan level. The Bishops are requested to find truly suitable posts for deacons, notably in team ministries.
12. The Province endeavor to deal with the inevitable changes, canonical, liturgical, and synodal, and the support needed to develop an effective network for the diaconate (the Fellowship of Deacons), that a true restoration of the distinctive diaconate would require.

Introduction

The report has a history

In October 2022 the Archbishop of Cape Town set up a Commission to investigate the Ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate.

There was a history to this action.

In 1982, the Provincial Synod refused to discuss the report of a Commission Commission on the Diaconate.

Thirty-six years later, at the Provincial Standing Committee of 28 September 2018 a motion was proposed arising from a report of the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons:

Noting there is an omission in terms of the duties of a distinctive deacon in the Anglican Prayer Book, thereby creating a lack of clarity among both clergy and laity.

Therefore respectfully requests that the Synod of Bishops be asked to:

1. Examine the role and ministry of permanent deacons in the Province with a view to recognizing the distinctive vocation to the Holy Order of deacons, as discerned in respective dioceses.
2. Apply their minds to this anomaly, and to release a directive that would explain to the church the distinctive nature of the role of the permanent deacon as opposed to that of the transitional deacon.

An amended motion was the passed. The resolution read:

Noting that:

1. ACSA has recognized that the ordained ministry of the church is a three-fold ministry of deacons, priests and bishops; and
2. Celebrating the ministry of those who are discerned to the distinctive and permanent ministry of a deacon in the church;

Calls upon the Archbishop to establish a Commission* to investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate and to report to Provincial Synod 2019.

* The Archbishop may in his discretion make use of the following structures for this purpose: The Advisory Board for Theological Education and/or the Provincial Liturgical Committee.

The Provincial Standing Committee returned to the matter in September 2022 and the following resolution was passed unanimously:

This Provincial Standing Committee notes:

The Fellowship of Deacons has submitted a report to this PSC;

And in the light of analysis of the situation of distinctive [permanent] deacons;

This PSC:

Calls on all dioceses to nurture and promote the ministry of distinctive deacons within ACSA;

Requests the Archbishop to consider the implementation of the 2018 PSC resolution to establish a commission to investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate.

The set up and working of the Commission

The Archbishop set up the *Commission to investigate the Ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate* with the following members on 24 October 2022:

Bishop Charles Mthetheleli May

Bishop Eddie Daniels

Canon Bellina Mangena

Deacon Maggy Lebole Maja

Deacon Stanton Robertson

Deacon John Aitchison (who was appointed Convenor)

The Mandate of the Commission was to commence by the 15th of December 2022.

Deacon Gwynne Lawlor was co-opted onto the Commission in March 2023.

Revds Percy Chinganga and Craig Dunsmuir of the College of the Transfiguration and the Theological Education by Extension College were co-opted in November 2023.

The procedure of the Commission in developing this report was as follows:

- Online meetings were held monthly.
- For each meeting a background paper was prepared, circulated prior to the meeting, and discussed and critiqued. These background papers form much of the substance of the chapters in this Report.
- Through the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons, some personal accounts of the experiences of deacons were collected and analysed.
- With the assistance of the Principals of the College of the Transfiguration and Theological Extension by Education College a new section on a Training Programme for Deacons was added.

I. A history of the diaconate

Introduction

The Anglican Church has, since its inception as the Reformation period Church of England, had, as its ordained ministers, Bishops, Priests and Deacons. This is shown in article 36 of its Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion which speaks of “The Book of Consecration of Archbishops and Bishops, and Ordering of Priests and Deacons”. This is echoed in clauses 77 to 82 in the Catechism in the South African *An Anglican Prayer Book* of 1989. So in this tradition the threefold form of ordained ministry is a given and so it has remained and must continue to do so.

A subsidiary aspect of that tradition is to ascribe the start of the diaconate to events described in Chapter 6 of the *Acts of the Apostles* – so much so that the South African Anglican lectionary for December 26 states “St Stephen, **deacon** and martyr”. So in this tradition the origins of the diaconate are present in that New Testament text (Acts 6:1-7).

Now to make sense of a diaconal ministry today, two opposite but complementary errors need to be avoided, two errors or potential errors that can very easily be linked to the statements in the two paragraphs above.

The first error is to assume that whatever form the ordained ministry now takes has indeed truly evolved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and is therefore right. What the Church practice has ended up with is definitive. That which is, what we have, must be right!

The second error is to assume that whatever shape and function the ordained ministry has today can be discerned directly or implicitly in the New Testament (or in the New Testament and the Patristic writers) and its renewal simply means reasserting that original primitive shape and function.

The examination in this paper of the historical evidence about the diaconate seeks to clear the decks of dubiously historical or anachronistic baggage that would inhibit the Anglican Church of Southern Africa from viewing clearly the case for (and against) a renewal of the ordained ministry of deacons. To reiterate, looking at the historical evidence in the New Testament and ancient writings to see what deacons were, is not meant to encourage an anachronistic attitude – “let’s do it exactly like in the New Testament” – but to avoid working with long lived misconceptions of what deacons are or are meant to be. It is a clearing out of misunderstandings so that we can have a clean foundation (which may well be Biblical) for building a renewal, if there is to be one, of a diaconate for today.

The New Testament evidence

Since the Church's understanding of the work of the deacon supposedly developed from its reading of the New Testament, it is necessary to re-look at the New Testament evidence about deacons and the other 'ministers' of the young Church. Unfortunately there is no simple answer to the question of what a 'minister' is, that is, if we restrict ourselves to the New Testament writers and to the reported words of Jesus on 'ministry'.

Of Jesus we can say little more than that he saw his followers as a "flock" (that is, a group of people, not just isolated individuals) guided, protected and overseen by a shepherd, a kinship band who were the new temple, a true worshipping community, whose members have the authority to forgive sins and who are "sent" to bring the good news to all. Ministers are those who are the servants to this community. Mandated-by-God-service (*diakonia*) is the principle of this ministry and the authority and esteem of the minister depends on this humble service (Luke 22:24-27 expresses this particularly well). In sum, service, leadership and mission are all expressed in what Jesus says about ministry, and leadership is seen as arising out of this *diakonia*. The New Testament writers also concur that *diakonia* is the qualification for ministry (1 Corinthians 16:15-16).

Unfortunately the terms used for actual 'ministers' are confusing and can be summed up by saying that in the New Testament church there was not yet a fixed order of ministries. Nor is the New Testament particularly clear about what these ministers actually did. So what kinds of 'ministers' seem to have been in operation? There were:

- those who received direct and different **gifts** of grace to minister as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, administrators, ecstasies, interpreters, evangelists, pastors, etc. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28; Ephesians 4:11-12).
- **bishops and deacons** (the latter certainly including women), with the bishops exercising responsibility, oversight and shepherding (Philippians 1:1) and deacons exercising ministry. The bishops came to exercise a particularly important role in being responsible not only to the local congregation but to the wider church (as the church was never considered as a loose federation of autonomous congregations but as a single body).
- **elders** (presbyters)¹ who appear to have been a group of the leading older people in the local congregation and who clearly have some authority. Paul, for example, appointed leaders in the congregations he founded (Acts 14:20-23) and he describes them as his fellow workers (1 Corinthians 16:5, 2 Corinthians 8:23, Ephesians 6:21, Philippians 2:25, Colossians 1:7, 4:7). They have a governance and advisory role.

1 To be noted is that the same term, elders (presbyters), is used in the gospel account for the elders of Jerusalem who, together with the priests, are antagonistic to Jesus (e.g. Matthew 27:1) so it is quite clear that the term "presbyter" is a general and commonly used term referring to a senior person who has some governing or advisory authority. (It needs to be noted that the English word 'priest', now applied to the regular Anglican clergy, is in fact an English corruption of the word 'presbyter' (that is, elder). No ministers in the New Testament are described as priests (*hierios*)). Certainly in New Testament times the local synagogues would have had elders and a leader of the congregation, an *archisynagogos*, who was responsible for presiding over the congregation, directing the services, choosing the readers of the scriptures, and deliverer of the sermon (Mark 5:22, 35-36, 38; Luke 8:41-49; 13:14; Acts 18:8, 17). Synagogues had a central throne or cathedra which was the seat for the leader of the congregation. The synagogue elders were not Priests and Levites (they were welcome to participate in synagogue life, including worship, but they had no special leadership role).

There continue to be debates by scholars as to whether bishops were the same thing as elders, or a select group within the elders, or (maybe in a later development) a special person selected out of the elders to be their president, and as to how the final arrangement of the three orders of ordained ministers, bishops, presbyters and deacons, developed.

The problem is that the New Testament names these ministerial offices but never tells us what they do (the readers of that time would of course have known) and never speaks of bishops (overseers/supervisors), presbyters (elders), and deacons (ministers) all together in one string of words. All we know that in this first century the deacons played an important role in leading the *diakonia*, the ministry of Christian community. They were entrusted with important tasks. It is implied that deacons were subservient to the bishop, but their ministry was not an inferior one, as there is no rigid hierarchical order in the New Testament times.

The early Church evidence

The fourth Bishop of Rome, Clement, writing about AD 96, said that bishops and deacons had been appointed by the apostles. He does not clearly distinguish between bishops and presbyters and it may be that the bishop was a presbyter elected by fellow presbyters to preside over the Eucharist and that deacons related to the bishop in this liturgical role.

A very early document, *The Lord's teaching through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations* (the *Didache*), written between AD 70 and AD 100, speaks of bishops and deacons also doing the ministry of the prophets and teachers. They ensured the regular celebration of the Eucharist.

Polycarp, martyred in AD 155, says that presbyters have to take care of widows, orphans, and the destitute. Deacons, are "of God and not of men" (*Letter to the Philippians* 5:1) and are to "walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became *diakonos* of all". Justin, martyred in AD 165, said that deacons distributed the Eucharistic bread and wine.

Hippolytus, a conservative contender for the bishopric of Rome, states in his *Apostolic Tradition* of about AD 228 that:

"The deacon is not ordained to the presbyterate but to the *hypēresia* [*the work of a public official, functionary, or executive officer*] of the bishop, that he may do only what the bishop commands him. For he is not appointed to be the fellow-counsellor of the whole clergy but to take charge of property and report to the bishop whatever is necessary. He does not receive the Spirit which is common to all the presbyterate, in which the presbyters share, but that which is entrusted to him under the bishop's authority."

Another early church document, the *Teaching of the Apostles* (*Didascalia Apostolorum*), a manual on Church order and practice written in Syria about AD 230, describes the deacon as being in the service of the bishop, acting as a manager and reporting to the bishop what is necessary. The deacon is first of all the bishop's servant. The bishop is an overseer and the deacon his executive. In fact, according to the *Didascalia*, the bishop is so supreme that the laity have no access to him save through the deacon, who acts as a liaison officer.

Deacons would report to the bishop on the needs of all so that decisions could be made and action planned (iii: 13):

"And be you [bishop and deacon] of one counsel and of one purpose, and one soul dwelling in two bodies. ... It is required of you deacons therefore that you visit all who are in need, and inform the bishop of those who are in distress; and you shall be his soul and his mind; and in all things you shall be taking trouble and be obedient to him."

“But let them have very free access to the deacons, and let them not be troubling the head at all times, but making known what they require through the ministers, that is through the deacons. For neither can any man approach the Lord God Almighty except through Christ. All things therefore that they desire to do, let them make known to the bishop through the deacons, and then do them.”

“Let the bishops and the deacons, then, be of one mind; and do you shepherd the people diligently with one accord. For you ought both to be one body, father and son; for you are in the likeness of the Lordship. And let the deacon make known all things to the bishop, even as Christ to His Father. But what things he can, let the deacon order, and all the rest let the bishop judge. Yet let the deacon be the hearing of the bishop, and his mouth and his heart and his soul; for when you are both of one mind, through your agreement there will be peace also in the Church.”

The deacons were a distinctive ministry of service and agency, working to inspire, equip and mobilise the congregation in their ministries of service, healing, care and justice. They were the agents of the bishop who presided over the church’s liturgical and spiritual life. They presented the offerings of the community at the gathering, saw that they were shared, and ensured that those who could not get to the gathering (the sick, the imprisoned, women unable to leave the confines of the homes, slaves) were served. They checked out Christians who came from another congregation before admitting them into the assembly.

The number of deacons should be proportionate to the size of the congregation to enable them to know and to minister to all (iii.13). (One known example from a court record of AD 303 had a bishop, three presbyters, two deacons and four sub-deacons serving a congregation of little over a hundred.)

Liturgically, the deacons handled the oblations and kept order in the assembly, including finding places for the old and infirm to sit (even if the bishop had to give up his seat and sit on the ground!)

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* also notes the important role of female deacons here (iii. 12) :

“For there are houses where you cannot send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but you may be able to send a deacon [female].”

Deacons could be materially supported by the congregation with food and clothing and other things needed, but they also had to use gifts from the congregation to meet the needs of widows, orphans and strangers.

The move towards the threefold order

At the beginning of the Second Century we witness a gradual transformation into a stable and accepted order of the three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons (1 Timothy 4:6). There are various scholarly theories about a merging of a Jewish model of synagogue elders (with a president) and a Greek model of bishop(s) and deacons.

The first time we have a crystal clear statement of the Church having a threefold ministry comes from the letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch who was martyred in about AD 110 – probably less than fifty years after the deaths of Peter and Paul.

In these letters we find some of the earliest references to things we now take for granted – such as the centrality of the Eucharist, Sunday as a replacement of the Sabbath, and the term “catholic” applied to the Church.

His letters serve to record the rapid development of a stable threefold church hierarchy (though we must not impose our modern and somewhat authoritarian ideas of what ‘hierarchy’ meant onto those times). Ignatius is the earliest known Christian writer to emphasize loyalty to a single bishop in each city (or diocese) who is assisted by both presbyters and deacons. Indeed for Ignatius, having this three fold ministry was an essential sign of the Church:

“Apart from these, there is no Church”.

From what Ignatius tells us we can get a sense of the powerful independent role of deacons in the early church. Ignatius placed enormous value on their work. In his *Letter to the Trallians* (3) he says “let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ.” This is what he says about the bishops, presbyters and deacons (*Letter to the Magnesians* 6):

“Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the diakonia of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest.”

So there we have a very clearly delineated threefold ministry and we can get a sense of what function each of the three roles involved:

- The bishop was the presider over the church in a particular place, the “spiritual crown of your presbytery”.
- The presbyters, the elders, were the council of senior people in the church who govern and advise.
- The deacons who are “entrusted with the diakonia of Jesus Christ” minister and serve.

The deacons were the people who most directly heard the concerns of the people of the Church and community and could inform the Bishop of what was needed – for relief for the poor, taking the sacrament to the sick and imprisoned, raising money to pay for relief, handling communications during times of persecution and, even at times, acting as the bodyguards of the Bishop in danger from pagan mobs. There were both male and female deacons and the latter had a particular ministry to women who might never be allowed to leave their homesteads.

Deacons also had an important liturgical role in the Eucharist and in Baptism and Ignatius (*Letter to the Trallians* 2:1-3) says:

“It is fitting also that the deacons, as being dispensers of the mysteries [*sacraments*] of Jesus Christ, should in every respect be pleasing to all.”

It is clear from Ignatius that the deacon, like the bishop and presbyter, belongs to the altar. The deacon still combined liturgical and welfare functions. He cared for widows and orphans and visited the faithful, reporting their needs to the bishop. The requirement to inform the bishop shows that the deacon was subordinate to him. Ignatius insisted that the deacon was “subject to the bishop as to the grace of God and to the presbyterium as to the law of Christ”. In other words he was not a lesser official serving human superiors, he is still seen as someone who in his own right carries out an important function in Christ’s redemptive work.

Ignatius speaks of two deacons, Burrhus and Sotio, as being his fellow-servants and of another, Philo of Cilicia, “a man of reputation, who still ministers to me in the word of God”.

In his *Letter to the Magnesians* (2) he talks: “of my fellow slave, the deacon Zotion. I am delighted with him, because he submits to the bishop as to God’s grace, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ” and continues (10) with the suggestion that the church in Antioch

(where Ignatius had been Bishop) “elect a deacon to act as an ambassador of God” to the church in Philadelphia and says “Blessed is he in Jesus Christ, who shall be deemed worthy of such a ministry.”

To sum up in more modern language, the deacons are the information gatherers, the intelligence agents of the local Christian community and the information they gather is to be used to galvanize the diaconal action of the congregation. The *diakonia* of the disciples also needs leadership and when it comes to people who are ordained to be deacons, they are those who have been authorised by the Church to lead and guide these diaconal activities – and these activities are far more expansive than simply distributing food to the poor. As Ignatius also put it:

“They are not deacons of food and drink but are officers of the Church of God.”

With the 3rd century the picture changes, the fluidity of ministries found in the New Testament had fully hardened into the three-fold hierarchy of bishops, presbyters and deacons. The environment was also changing, after AD 313 Christianity was no longer prohibited and eventually became the state religion with access to state resources for welfare. Bishops no longer presided over congregations of a hundred or a couple of hundred but now of thousands, and more ministers were required.

So far as the diaconate was concerned, emphasis now came to be laid not on the deacons’ work but on the deacon’s status. The deacon now was a subordinate member of a fixed threefold order. We read in Hippolytus’ *The Apostolic Tradition* that when a deacon is ordained “the bishop alone lays on hands, for the deacon is not ordained to the presbyterate but to the bishop’s service, to do what the latter tells him”. His ministry is to be the bishop’s helper.

A later set of documents, the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, probably from Syria about AD 375 provides further details of the status of deacons in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

“For now the deacon is to you Aaron, and the bishop Moses. If, therefore, Moses was called a god by the Lord, let the bishop be honoured among you as a god, and the deacon as his prophet. For as Christ does nothing without His Father, so neither does the deacon do anything without his bishop; and as the Son without His Father is nothing, so is the deacon nothing without his bishop; and as the Son is subject to His Father, so is every deacon subject to his bishop; and as the Son is the messenger and prophet of the Father, so is the deacon the messenger and prophet of his bishop. Wherefore let all things that he is to do with any one be made known to the bishop, and be finally ordered by him.” (Book 1, xxx)

The deacon has to report everything to the bishop “as Christ does to the Father” but can deal alone with the delegated work, reducing the burden on the bishop::

“But let him order such things as he is able by himself, receiving power from the bishop, as the Lord did from His Father the power of creation and of providence. But the weighty matters let the bishop judge ; but let the deacon be the bishop’s ear, and eye, and mouth, and heart, and soul, that the bishop may not be distracted with many cares, but with such only as are more considerable, as Jethro did appoint for Moses, and his counsel was received.” (Book 2, xlv).

In the liturgical assemblies the deacons are the managers:

“When thou callest an assembly of the Church as one that is the commander of a great ship, appoint the assemblies to be made with all possible skill, charging the deacons as mariners to prepare places for the brethren as for passengers, with all due care and decency ... for they are like the mariners and managers of the ship ... But if any one be found sitting out of his place, let him be rebuked by the deacon, as a manager of the foreship, and be removed into the place proper for him; for the Church is not only like a ship, but also like a sheepfold.”

Another account, from about AD 384, by the nun, Egeria, of the Church in Jerusalem, tells us that the deacons lead prayers and intercessions and psalms but does not mention them reading lessons or preaching. When the bishop takes his seat, they remain standing round him like bodyguards. They make announcements. Egeria shows that the recently introduced title of “archdeacon” was applied to the leading deacon in Jerusalem, and that it was this deacon who gave out the special notices during the pre-Easter ceremonies. It may well be that the archdeacon was elected by the other deacons (Wilkinson, 1971, pp. 31-33).

Jackson (2015, p. 10) summarises the overall situation in these early times thus:

“Deacons have a major liturgical role and administrative and charitable duties. They act as administrative assistants to the bishop. They baptize. They have clear functions in the Eucharist. They are even known – though rarely – to have presided at eucharistic celebrations. They are ministers of charity, ministers to the sick and the aged. They may reconcile penitents. But, though ministers of the “Word”, they do not normally preach. They are sometimes placed in charge of small congregations. Some are elected bishops. ‘The third century was a period in which the dignity and importance of the deacon increased at the expense of the presbyter.’”

The fall of the diaconate

As is clear from the *Didascalia* and the letters of Ignatius, deacons had a powerful position as the executives of the bishop. As the Church grew in size and persecution waned, their position began to be contested by the presbyters, who were growing in numbers as the Church expanded.

The desire to subordinate the deacons to the presbyters was brought into sharp focus by the Synod of Arles in Gaul in AD 314. This Synod ruled that the deacon was subordinate not only to the bishop but to the presbyter as well: “the deacon should not be arrogant, he should honour the presbyter and do nothing without his knowledge”. (It also ordered that the practice of delegating a deacon to preside over the Eucharist should cease and that conscientious objectors to military service should be excommunicated!) This negative attitude to the deacons was particularly prevalent among the presbyters of Rome and in AD 375 a pamphlet was published there *On the arrogance of deacons*.

Though the reasons for this might have been many and varied, one thing seems clear, it is the importance and high status of the diaconate that contributed to this state of affairs. Both bishops and especially the presbyters, might have felt threatened by the deacon’s significant role.

In Rome the situation was made worse by the what had now become the established misreading of Acts 6:1-7, it was assumed that there could only be seven deacons per bishop. So Rome had a maximum of seven deacons, who, in effect became the executive heads of the seven ecclesiastical districts of Rome and managers of all the Church assets.

Of all Bishops of Rome elected between 432 and 684, only three were previously ordained presbyters – the others were all deacons (who, like the bishop, were elected by the whole body of the church). Indeed being ordained as a presbyter was the kiss of death to your chances of becoming Pope! It was usually the deacons who had the requisite experience to lead the Church.

But the downside was that seven deacons were simply insufficient in the huge city like Rome – yet hundreds of presbyters were available. Over time they took over. As Collins (2002, p. 124) sums up:

“the church did nothing to support or expand the pastoral relevance of the deacons.”

Enright (2006, p. 17) puts this change in wider perspective:

“Increasingly, from the late third century into the fifth century and thereafter, the importance of an individual order called “deacon” became less and less important. There is, if you will, a reduction from a threefold ministry to a twofold ministry... As Christianity increased in size and began to move out into the countryside, however, the bishop, who remained in the city, needed to provide for the celebration of the Eucharist; he therefore began to assign presbyters to take over the priestly role that once was solely his in the small city congregations. The deacon, by his very ordination, being assigned to the bishop, did not accompany the presbyters out into the countryside. Thus, eventually the diaconate ceased to be a distinct permanent ministry and became a step to the priesthood.”

In the Western church this conflict ended badly for the diaconate and by AD 700 the ordination of permanent deacons fell away completely, and only transitional deacons, en route to the presbyterate, remained. From then on until the 20th century Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church was regarded as simply a stage on the road to the priesthood and Canon Law only allowed bishops to ordain deacons who were to go on to the priesthood.

So, although the deacons were the first full-time and professional ministers at a time when the presbyters were hardly more than a small advisory board, over a few centuries the presbyter gained the position as the normal minister in charge of a congregation. The diaconate lost many of its real functions in the West (though they remained a distinctive order in the Eastern churches).

Collins puts it bluntly (2002, p. 9):

“the kind of deacons who functioned in its first few centuries ... were lost to it for over a thousand years largely as a result of the church’s unworthy ways.”

From the Middle Ages to Modern times

By the time of the Middle Ages in the West the influence of the deacon declined and his functions were restricted to the liturgy, though as Collins (2002, p. 10) states, “they almost disappear except for performers dressed in dalmatics at high liturgical festivals, who are actually priests disguised as deacons.” There were of course exceptions – St Francis was a deacon who refused to go further and get priested.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church the diaconal ministry remained but tended to become increasingly liturgical (with prescribed functions which would not be done by a priest), with the social welfare ministry falling away. Generally this is seen as partly due to the fact that for many centuries Orthodoxy remained largely under Muslim rule, or, in the 20th century, under Communist regimes. The only exception to this was Tsarist Russia, where in the 19th century deacons were re-established as part of the normal parish ministry for each church having more than 700 members and were made responsible for religious and public education. This ended with the suppression of the Church under Communist rule. During the Communist period Orthodox churches in the West had deacons and priests who were mainly self-supporting.

In Africa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, originally an offshoot of the Coptic Church in Egypt, has numerous presbyters (typically five presbyters concelebrate the liturgy) and a group of deacons assisting the rector of a church. Three deacons are required for any Eucharist. Each church has its own Archdeacon as leader among the deacons.

The Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation leaders aimed at rediscovering the New Testament ministries and thus were willing to restore the diaconate but, following the traditional misinterpretation of Acts 6, the diaconate as reformed only had a social welfare brief and totally neglected the ancient liturgical functions of the deacon.

Calvin for example had two types of deacons, elected by the elders, those who administered the alms and those who cared for the poor and the sick. The deacons collected contributions from the congregation; visited the members, served at the tables with Holy Communion. Elders were usually senior men; deacons junior men. In the Dutch Reformed Churches deacons are also members of the local church council. A special feature of the Dutch Reformed Churches is the fact that the diaconate of each local church is its own legal entity with its own financial means, separated from the church itself, and governed by the deacons.

In the Lutheran Church there was a revival of a religious order of deaconesses in the 1800s as part of a social welfare movement in Germany. It was not engaged liturgically and operated in schools, hospitals, orphanages and general care for the poor and distressed. This deaconess movement spread to the Scandinavian and other European countries and also influenced other denominations, including Calvinist and Methodist.

In Methodism, the Wesleyan Deaconess Order was formed in 1890 and then in 1986 reopened the order to both men and women. Then in 1996, in the United States of America, ended the transitional deacon and a new Order of Deacons established to be equal in status with the Order of Elders. In the United Kingdom deacons are stipendiary and trained together with presbyters at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theology in Birmingham. They are members of a religious order with a rule of life (Methodist Church, 2004). Deacons also serve in a variety of specialized ministries including, but not limited to, Christian education, music, communications and ministries of justice and advocacy.

The Church of England kept the three orders, but restricted what the deacon could do liturgically and largely deprived him of social welfare duties (though these duties were noted in the ordination rites – there is a wonderful instruction in the Anglican ordination rite (of 1986) for deacons where they are instructed: “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, the concerns and hopes of the world.” The earlier (1662) wording is more down to earth: “to search out the sick, the poor, the impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate, that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.” Then in the later part of the twentieth century there were some gradual attempts at restoring a living diaconate.

The Roman Catholic Church's counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545-1563) recommended re-institution of permanent diaconate and declared that those who consider the diaconate “useless” to be heretics and that diaconal functions should not be exercised except by deacons (Session 23, Chapter 17).

The proposals was not followed through and not much happened until Vatican II (1962-1965) which reaffirmed the diaconate in accordance with tradition, widened the range of liturgical functions of the deacon, and restored the diaconate as a separate and permanent rank in the hierarchy of the Church. Enacted in 1967 through the document *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, single or married men could be ordained to the permanent diaconate. The implementation of these reforms was left to the decision of each episcopal conference according to guidelines issued in 1971. Some 10 percent of ordained clergy are now deacons.

The diaconate in the Anglican Church

In the Church of England reformation the number of orders was reduced to three (bishop, priest and deacon), and as it had been before, the diaconate remained mainly a transitional one on the way to the higher order of the priesthood. However, a significant minority did not transition but remained as deacons. Those who were considered less educated or those lacking the social connections to obtain a 'title' to be ordained as a priest (that is, the candidate needed to have access to a guaranteed income or living from a parish or other entity). "These deacons formed a clerical underclass of chaplains, perpetual curates, schoolmasters and other functionaries until well into the eighteenth century." (Young, 2014)

By the beginning of the 1800s such lifelong deacons had all but disappeared, but in the mid-1880s the educator and historian Thomas Arnold began a movement to restore a meaningful diaconate. He saw this as a way of allowing less educated men to participate in mission and receive ordination. Arnold was concerned at the widening gap between the clergy and the working class in industrial towns as well as between the clergy and laity in general. A Parliamentary bill to allow for non-stipendiary clergy failed largely because most clergy were unwilling to compromise their recently won professional status, as Church of England clergy were, as a group, now considered to be 'gentlemen'. (Wilson, No date)

The work of Roland Allen, in China, Kenya and South Africa in the early 1900s on non-stipendiary clergy was also beset by the class snobbery of both clergy and laity who resisted to the idea of less well educated clergy from the working class.

It was only later in the 20th Century that there were the beginnings of a restoration of a true diaconal order (after centuries of neglect in which it was seen as an "inferior" order that was used as a training year of apprenticeship for young priests, a custom which was often dysfunctional because deacons were habitually treated as inferiors and they were, anyway, not allowed to do many of the things that the presbyters claimed as their sole prerogative).

The renewal was partly a response to the increasing marginalization of the churches in the Western post-Christian, secularized society, and a rediscovery of their historical and biblical mission to the poor and needy and thus their call to *diakonia*.

Since the late 1950s there have been various recommendations and resolutions on the restoration of the diaconate in the Anglican Church worldwide.

Calls were made at the Lambeth Conference of 1958 for the recovery of the diaconate and worries expressed that the commissioning and licensing of lay ministers would deprecate the traditional order of deacons. They defined deacons, as distinct from lay ministers, as persons who are required to devote the whole of their lives to this calling and who have a distinctive place within the threefold ministry of the church.

Though the Conference recognised practical difficulties in a restoration, it recommended (in Resolution 88) that:

"each Province of the Anglican Communion shall consider whether the office of deacon shall be restored to its primitive place as a distinctive order in the church, instead of being regarded as a probationary period for the priesthood."

Following on a World Council of Churches Consultation on the diaconate in 1964 (see *The Ministry of Deacons*, World Council of Churches) the Lambeth Conference of 1968 noted the calls since the Lambeth Conference of 1958 for the recovery of the diaconate.

Its report stated that “to deprive the ordained ministry of the witness of the diaconate would be to impoverish its symbolism at the point where the greatest emphasis needs to be laid” and stated firmly and unequivocally that the Anglican Communion should move towards a recovery of the diaconate as a significant and operative order within the sacred ministry. It also argued that the recovery of the diaconate would lead to a “re-establishment of the relationship of the secular world to the will of God through the liturgical action of the deacon.”

The following resolution (No 32) was passed that recommended:

- “(a) That the diaconate, combining service of others with liturgical functions, be open to
 - (i) men and women remaining in secular occupation
 - (ii) full-time church workers
 - (iii) those selected for the priesthood.
- (b) That Ordinals should, where necessary, be revised:
 - (i) to take account of the new role envisaged for the diaconate;
 - (ii) by the removal of reference to the diaconate as ‘an inferior office’;
 - (iii) by emphasis upon the continuing element of diakonia in the ministry of bishops and priests.”

Then the Anglican Consultative Council held in Trinidad in 1973 advised (in Resolution Ten) that:

- “(a) that the use of the diaconate as a period of preparation for the priesthood be retained and that every church should review its practice to ensure that this period is one of continued training and further testing of vocation; but that it is not to be regarded as necessarily leading to the priesthood;
- (b) that the churches, and particularly the laity, be invited to examine the concept of the diaconate as an Order to which lay people serving the Church, or serving in the name of the Church, could also be admitted, to express and convey the authority of the Church in their service ...”

In 1974 a Church of England committee report, *Deacons in the Church*, dominated by a 1960s ‘ministry as social service’ ethos, argued for the abolition of the diaconate stating that “there was no functional task that belonged exclusively to deacons” and that “deacons take away from, and indeed clericalize, ministry which properly belonged to lay people.”

The Lambeth conference 1978 (in Resolution 20) endorsed the Trinidad resolution of 1968.

In Southern Africa the first notable move was the setting up of a Commission on the Diaconate, prompted by the issue of lay ministers, which reported in 1981, This lengthy report concluded that:

“the diaconate of the Church is that of Jesus Christ its Lord. This diaconate is to be exercised by all the members. The ordained order of deacons exemplifies and enables the total diaconal ministry of the church.”

and that:

“A restoration of the diaconate, therefore, would be a recognition that social concern is a proper part of the ministry of the Church, and that certain persons, with the grace of Holy Orders, are especially set aside to stimulate, co-ordinate and encourage such work.”

It also recognized that there were obstacles standing in the way of this restoration and made a number of specific suggestions about the work of deacons. If positive action was taken to restore the diaconate it:

“would mean not only removing the negative references in Canons and Rubrics, but also actively encouraging vocations to a permanent diaconate. It would also require teaching on the diaconate at all levels of the Church, Provincial, Diocesan and Parochial.”

The Commission made a large number of general and specific conclusion and recommendations. But the Provincial Synod of 1982 voted not to even consider the report, and few if any of its recommendations have subsequently been addressed, possibly because much of the attention of church leadership in the 1980s was devoted to the then controversial issue of the ordination of women to the presbytery. But this led to permanent deacons being considered again as a first step in the now growingly successful movement to ordain women and between 1987 and 1994, women began to be ordained as deacons.

But the general trend to restore the diaconate in both the Anglican Church worldwide and in other denominations largely passed by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA).

The 1988 Lambeth stated:

“We need to recover the diaconate as an order complementary to the order of priesthood rather than as a merely transitional order which it is at present. We should ensure that such a diaconate does not threaten the ministry of the laity but seeks to equip and further it. Such a diaconate, furthermore, would serve to renew the diakonia of the whole Church: laity, deacons, priests and bishops.”

A 1989 Anglican Church of Canada report expressed strong support for a revival:

“There’s a deacon-shaped hole in the Church, waiting to be filled by people whose example and experience will initiate, encourage, and give leadership to the diaconate of the whole people of God. By raising up such people as deacons or servant-leaders, the Church can breathe new life into an ancient order, making it an equal but different form of ministry.”

Then the 1998 Lambeth Conference said:

“Where deacons exercise their special ministry in the Church, they do so by illuminating and holding up the servant ministry of the whole Church and calling its members to that ministry ... The re-establishment of the diaconate ... liberates bishops and presbyters to exercise their complementary and distinctive tasks.”

In a 2001 report by a working party of the House of Bishops, *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*, provided a comprehensive analysis of the pastoral potential of deacons but it was rejected by the General Synod at that time under pressure from the theologically and liturgically trained Lay Readers (of which there were over 10 000 in England, a greater number than the stipendiary clergy).

This was followed up in 2007 by another Church of England study, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, which urged that the diaconate be taken more seriously and noted that though its theological framework already existed it had remained unrecognised. The distinctive diaconate should be encouraged and the transitional diaconate should take longer than a year.

In the same year the Church of England changed the ordinal for the deacon, which reflected an enhanced understanding of the concept of diakonia for which there was a paramount need and for which the diaconate has a signal role in contributing towards meeting.

Since the 1990s a number of permanent self-supporting deacons were ordained in South Africa but only in some dioceses and this impetus soon dwindled, mired as it was in continuing controversy over the status of self-supporting clergy in general.

In 2012 the Highveld Deacons' Fellowship was established and the first provincial conference of the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons held in 2015 with the blessing of the Archbishop. Connections were also made with the international organisation Diakonia World Federation and its African and Europe region (DRAE). Further provincial conferences were held in 2016 and 2018.

In 2017 representation was granted to the Fellowship on the Provincial Standing Committee. Dioceses were encouraged to adopt a Resolution of Permanent Force for the Diaconate (as the Highveld diocese had done).

In September 2018 a Provincial Standing Committee resolution called on the Archbishop to set up a commission to investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate and to report to Provincial Synod in 2019. This resolution states:

"ACSA recognises that the ordained ministry of the church is a three-fold ministry of deacons, priests and bishops."

Nothing materialized and in 2022 again a new resolution was passed at Provincial Standing Committee:

"This Provincial Standing Committee notes:

The Fellowship of Deacons has submitted a report to this Provincial Standing Committee;

And in the light of analysis of the situation of distinctive [permanent] deacons;

This Provincial Standing Committee:

Calls on all dioceses to nurture and promote the ministry of distinctive deacons within ACSA;

Requests the Archbishop to consider the implementation of the 2018 Provincial Standing Committee resolution to establish a commission to investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate."

The Commission was duly set up and this document was compiled for its use.

Postscript thoughts on the history of the diaconate

It is tempting to create a template of the New Testament and early Church evidence on the diaconate and, in a thoroughly anachronistic way, superimpose it over a present day Sunday service. Clearly it is not Ignatius' church that is so delineated:

"the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the *diakonia* of Jesus Christ".

At the parish Eucharist the Bishop is not present (maybe representing the *Deus absconditus* of the modern secularised world) and a single presbyter takes the place of the Bishop. There are no other presbyters and the closest approximation to there being the 'council of the apostles' is the Parish Council, who are not clergy, and seen liturgically only when a Church Warden reads the notices. There are no deacons around 'entrusted with the diakonia of Jesus Christ' (unless it is a training parish which has a young trainee presbyter (who age-wise is certainly not an 'elder')

masquerading as a deacon). If we take another picture, the court record of the persecution of a local church in Cirta, North Africa in AD in 303 – it had one bishop, three presbyters, two deacons and four sub-deacons serving a congregation of little over a hundred. Again the mismatch is obvious.

So, to imagine that the current three-fold order of Bishop, Presbyter and Deacon somehow accurately represents Biblical or Patristic tradition and practice is simply anachronistic. It does not. And what is very apparent is that at the parish level of practice the sole presbyter is *de facto* the 'Bishop' who presides over the Eucharist and does work that the deacon once did and at best accepts some advice from an unordained temporary set of elders in a Parish Council. So put, it is not a very attractive and also a highly clericalised model that must clearly inhibit the effectiveness of diaconal leadership in the *diakonia* of the Body of Christ.

The consequence is that to seek to return to a supposed primitive or original diaconate is as anachronistic a venture as is the idea that the present dominant transitional diaconate in any way represents ancient practice. Any restoration of a distinctive diaconate will have to be based on first principles, and that means a better understanding of the concept of *diakonia* and a better theology of the diaconate.

"It is my thought, that whatever we do now regarding the diaconate, cannot be based on how things were... or even currently are. The whole way church is done, including the ministerial tasks assigned to being Bishop, Priest and Deacon need to be rethought in line with what the people of God, the Church gathered needs today – in order to grow in faith, love and hope."
(Lawlor, 2023)

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2. The meaning of *diakonia*

Introduction – a re-reading Acts 6:1-7

In 1990 a Roman Catholic scholar, John Collins, published a ground-breaking book, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, a linguistic study of the use of the *diakon-* words in the New Testament and the Greek-speaking society of the time. The study thoroughly revised how to interpret (and translate) *diakonia*.

Words often change meaning over time and sometimes their original meanings have to be refreshed if they are to regain their original power – as with this term. The same thing happens with the interpretation of stories, and one such story is that found in *Acts* 6:1-7, an account whose misinterpretation has led to the diaconate being considered an inferior form of ministry.

So, before looking at the meanings of the *diakon-* words, it is instructive to look at Collins's illumination of the meaning of the *Acts* 6 story of the commissioning of the seven.

If you follow the account in most of the common English translations, you are told that in the young church in Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking widows were not getting their fair share of the daily distribution of food. The apostles did not want to neglect their preaching of the word of God, so they appointed seven men to handle this somewhat menial welfare task. This text is regularly used as the text at the ordination of deacons and perhaps suggests that they must expect to do menial service whilst they are still in training to become priests when they will be able to perform the superior ministry of the Word!

As was pointed out even in ancient times, this interpretation is rather confusing because two of these seven were soon out preaching and converting with such enthusiasm that Stephen gets martyred (*Acts* 6:8–7:60) and Philip converts the first African, an Ethiopian (*Act* 8:26-40) and is described as “the evangelist” (*Acts* 21:8). Clearly not in a waiting-on-tables job description! Something odd here, surely?

The problem is that the word *diakonia* in this passage has been translated, and misleadingly so, in three different ways. Take the *New Revised Standard Version*. It says that the widows were being neglected in the “daily **distribution of food**”. But in the original Greek text, there is no mention of the distribution of food: it says “daily *diakonia*”. Then it says the seven have to “**wait on tables**”. The Greek text says “*diakonein* of tables”. And lastly, the apostles by appointing these men, are said to have been freed to engage in “**servicing** the word”. But the Greek says the apostles do the “*diakonia* of the word”.

So the single Greek word *diakonia* has been translated as if referring to the distribution of food, being a waiter, and being a minister preaching the word. Given that Jesus said (in Mark 10:45) that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” the word *diakonia* has to have more multi-dimensional meaning than any single one of these interpretations, one that covers many forms of God-commissioned service.

Unfortunately, because of the Acts 6:1-7 misinterpretations, charitable or welfare or social and economic justice actions may be taken as inferior to “preaching the word” and the *diakonia* of these types may not be seen as essential – they can be sub-contracted out to ‘deacons’ or welfare societies instead of being something that all Christians have to do if they are true followers of him who came to do *diakonia*.

So re-looking at *Acts* 6:1-7, one can now have a very different reading.

The writer of *Acts* has already told us that the Christian community was a sharing community and all the believers shared and were cared for in their community. It is improbable that some widows would not be given any food at a communal meal. But the disciples were growing in number and complaints arose from the Greek-speaking disciples that their widows were being neglected in the “daily *diakonia*”. This first verse mention of *diakonia* probably refers to administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows, without specifying the kind of assistance required.

The apostles, who were all Aramaic speaking, were constantly engaged in preaching and evangelising in the Temple (doing the *diakonia* of the word). They probably did not have the language or cultural capacity to serve the needs among the Greek speakers. Indeed it is likely that the Greek-speaking widows were excluded from hearing the preaching, both because of a language barrier, and on account of the custom of them being restricted to the home.

So the Twelve apostles ask the Greek speakers to select some suitable people (“full of the Spirit and of wisdom”) to deal with this. The seven Greek-speaking men were therefore commissioned to take the preaching and any other necessary service into the widows’ homes, while the apostles were freed up to carry on the public preaching (in Aramaic) of the Word in the Temple. It is not a story about some people being delegated to run a soup-kitchen but about selecting people to lead the full *diakonia*, what Christ does, to a particular community (who would otherwise for cultural and language reasons be excluded). The seven receive a *diakonia*, a sacred commission, to minister to the Greek-speaking women and community.

It can thus rightly be pointed out that *Acts* 6:1-7 is actually about a radical expansion of the apostolic ministry beyond that of the Twelve. Indeed *Acts* uses the *diakon-* words for the kind of ministry by which the Word of God is to spread out from Jerusalem to the world, as seen in these two statements ascribed to Paul:

“the *diakonian* which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.” (*Acts* 20:24)

“He related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his *diakonias*.” (*Acts* 21:19)

So *Acts* 6:1-6 is not about the ordination of seven ‘deacons’ to take the load of running soup-kitchens off the hands of the Twelve ‘presbyters’ doing the real work of God, though this story clearly does have a connection to a Church that is diaconal and hence links to the sense in which the diaconate operated in the early Church. The Church, now as then, needs a leadership to **organise** the people of God for *diakonia*.

The *diakon-* words in the New Testament

Sometimes we are not fully aware of how ideas and practices change, often quite radically, over time. For Christians, the changes in their thought often come because people keep discovering, or rather rediscovering, what is in the Christian scriptures.

Collins's 1990 book led to precisely such a re-evaluation of the meaning of *diakonia*. The 2001 Church of England report, *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*, went so far as to describe it as "the recent rediscovery of the biblical idea of *diakonia*" (p. 9).

Collins found that in the recent past *diakonia* had been interpreted as menial service, which he believed was incorrect and led to a serious theological misunderstanding of the diaconate and indeed of ordained Christian ministry in general. In modern times the understanding of *diakonia* as service to the needy (owing much to the *Acts* 6:1 translation of *diakonia* as meaning the distribution of food to the deprived) began to influence how ministry in general was understood in the Church. Translations tended to replace ministry words with service words. Yet, Collins (2002, p. 20) contended:

"If service is the defining characteristic of deacons, in what way does their involvement in works of service distinguish them from other members of the Christian community, all of whom are called by the gospel to attend to the needs of those round them?"

The impact of the new understanding of *diakonia* that Collins expounded is seen in comparing the 1979 and 2000 editions of authoritative *Bauer's Greek-English lexicon* – the change is from *diakonia* being translated as:

- wait on someone at table
- serve generally, of services of any kind
- care for, take care of
- help, support someone
- the church office of somebody who does these things – a deacon

to:

- function as an intermediary, act as a go-between/agent, be at one's service with intermediary function either expressed or implied
- perform obligations, without focus on intermediary function
- meet an immediate need, help
- carry out official duties, minister
- rendering of specific assistance, aid, support; send someone something for support

Collins's (1990, 2002) evidence is that in the Greek-speaking world of the time the *diakon-* words carry a general meaning of:

- delegate/messenger/ambassador (e.g., Hermes is the messenger and agent of Zeus)
- the highly honoured table attendants at a religious festival or formal banquet who gave dignity to the event

The words imply mediation and mandate in the name of a commissioner. Collins found that the *diakon-* words were not about humble service but about persons acting as the assistants or attendants or delegates or messengers of people of higher authority. They were in a person-centred relationship with the one doing the commissioning.

As used within early Church writings the *diakon-* words:

- apply to the Church as a whole (not just deacons)
- have a strong religious connotation
- are applied to Jesus and the Church's mission (including the spread of the Word of God, missions from one church congregation to another, and to individuals within the church)
- refer to the highly respected attendants of persons of high rank
- relate to serving at table (but also in a religious context)
- denote an authorised, mandated (and therefore respected) activity and so the *diakonos* never stands alone as there is always someone to whom the *diakonos* is responsible who has mandated the task the *diakonos* performs.

So diaconal work was always the work of a commissioned agent, operative, envoy or delegate. Indeed the work of a *diakonos* is closer to that of a messenger (*apostolos*) than to humble service. For example, typically Paul used the term *diakonos* in reference to an agent with a sacred commission. Even the ruling Roman government administration in *Romans* 13:4, is described by him as the commissioned agent of God, "God's *diakonos* for your good." In *2 Corinthians* 11:13-15 Paul says that false apostles are the disguised "*diakonoi*" of Satan. The Christian ministers doing *diakonia* that Paul mentions include himself (*Romans* 15:25; *1 Corinthians* 3:5; *Ephesians* 3:7; *Colossians* 1:23, etc.), Epaphras (*Colossians* 1:7), Tychicus (*Ephesians* 6:21-22; *Colossians* 4:7-9), Phoebe (*Romans* 16:1-2), Apollos (*1 Corinthians* 3:5) and Jesus Christ "became a *diakonon* to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness" (*Romans* 15:8). *Diakonos* never occurs in any New Testament letter other than Paul's, and it doesn't occur at all in *Luke* or *Acts*, or *Revelation*. It occurs a few times in the other three Gospels in the context of Christian service (*Matthew* 20:26; 23:11; *Mark* 9:35; 10:43; *John* 12:26).

Collins further contended that the *diakon-* words were never used as a synonym for loving and caring service for the needy, for welfare activities, nor did it designate people who were agents of such welfare service. For Collins (1995, p. 167) *diakonia* is:

"Never an expression of loving service but service of one another always expressing the mandate of the subordinate from a superior."

This seems so startling a position, given the extent to which *diakonia* and service by deacons has often been seen for so long precisely as this loving response to the needs of others and particularly the poor, the sick and the oppressed. This view of Collins has been contested. A good example is Breed (2017, p. 49):

"Collins's supposition that *διακονία* is never done out of love or compassion for other people is found wanting. Rather, Mark describes Jesus's *διακονία* as done out of compassion and love for others, and as an envoy of God." (Breed, 2017, p. 249)

He argues that Collins, who made much of an analysis of Jesus' words in *Mark* 10:45, does not discuss *Mark* 10:45 in its full context.

“Throughout all his books and articles, this is the one thing that puts a question mark behind his findings. Collins does not discuss a word or verse in the context of the entire Gospel or letter in the New Testament; also, his research contains no structural analysis.” (Breed, 2017, p. 351)

Collins had argued that *Mark* 10:45 does not actually present Jesus as a humble waiter-servant responsive to others’ needs but as a person sent with and obeying a mandate from a superior.

Breed did a detailed analysis of *Mark* 8:1–10:52 asking the question:

“According to Mark, does the [diakon-]word group (also) express loving service to other people?” (Breed, 2017, p. 352)

Breed (pp. 354-355) affirms that *Mark* (in 8:31-38) has Jesus describe his followers as his envoys who should represent him and his way in every detail of their lives, no matter the cost to them. However, he contends that *Mark* 8:1–10:52 stresses Jesus’ mercy and responsiveness towards people in need and weakness. For example *Mark* 8:2 where Jesus says: “I have compassion on crowd” and Barthimaeus repeatedly calling on Jesus to have mercy on him (10:47-48). As part of Jesus teaching that the disciples must be last of all and *diakonoi* of all (9:35) he holds a child and says that what his followers do to a child (who is someone who is unimportant and with no claim to mercy) is what they do to him and the One who sent him (9:35-37). Breed says (2017, p. 357)

“It is clear that Mark connects the *διάκον-* word group closely to compassion, mercy and receptiveness, emphasizing that it should be done to ‘all’ without exclusion.”

To sum up Breed’s revision of Collins’s findings:

“Jesus’s way to glory and kingship went through serving his father and serving people. Serving people was an intrinsic part of serving his Father. As has been made clear, an intrinsic part of the disciples’ following of Jesus was being receptive to all (including children and beggars, e.g., Barthimaeus) and having compassion for those in need.”

The *Acts of the Apostles* stresses the *diakonia* of the apostolic proclamation and *Luke* uses *diakon-* words for the kind of ministry by which the Word of God is to spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

In *Acts* 1:25, the replacement apostle, Matthias, has to:

“take the place in this *diakonias* and apostleship from which Judas turned aside”.

So *diakonia* is performing a sacred mandate, a religious task or delivering an important message. Thus the sending of the relief to Jerusalem in the hands of Barnabas and Paul is a diaconal act. Paul and Barnabas are delegated, given a sacred mandate, and sent to deliver it and report to the elders in Jerusalem (*Acts* 11:29, 12:25):

“The disciples determined that, according to their ability, each would send *diakonian* to the brothers and sisters living in Judea; this they did, sending (*aposteilantes*) it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. ... Then after completing their *diakonian* Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem”

Paul sends out such diaconal attendants (*Acts* 19:22):

“So he sent two of his *diakoneō*, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia.”

Acts makes reference to Paul's ministry of *diakonia* (*Acts* 20:24, *Acts* 21:19). This is also the case in his letters. He sees himself as a *diakonos* sent by God (*Ephesians* 3:7):

"Of this gospel I have become a *diakonos* according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power."

The rediscovery of the meaning of *diakonia* and the diaconate

The rediscovery of the meaning of the *diakon-* words has immense implications for what we understand to be the place of *diakonia* in the Church and more specifically for re-examining the function of the order of deacons in the Church.

First, the evidence is clear that the people doing *diakonia* in the early Church were not menial skivvies – waiters at table – but commissioned agents and officers of the Church doing a wide variety of works in furtherance of the gospel. The people who came to be called deacons – *diakonoi* – and who in time became one of the three orders of the ordained ministry must have in their functions reflected the status and actions denoted by the *diakon-* words and intended to ensure that the gospel imperatives were performed by the whole Church.

Service and care for all was the duty of the whole Church, of all Christians. But from the evidence in early Church writings it seems that the mandatory task of deacons, as authorised agents of the Bishop, was to get ministry and service organised – whether that was by evangelising, exhortation, preaching, communicating or simply good management of resources. Deacons were there to get all to do loving service. And their authority to do this was from the Lord.

Second, an attempt to renew the diaconate based upon a misunderstanding of the meaning of *diakonia* by limiting it to church providing social workers for the needy is a cul-de-sac that removes the duty of all Christians to do such service and increases a polarization between evangelism and social concern (whether of caring, advocacy, or political action). Further it clericalizes what is the vocation of all Christian disciples to do *diakonia*. Yet it was precisely such a purely social service perspective that informed many of the attempts to revivify a diaconate from the Lutheran deaconesses movement of the mid-19th century to more modern attempts in other denominations. Even the 1981 Commission argued strongly that a diaconate could be used "to carry out works of charity and administration, and to do works of social welfare in the name of the Church" including care of the sick, widows and orphans, and the poor and oppressed.

Ironically enough, one of the great success stories of the Christianisation of large parts of the world is that what were once unique features of Christian teaching and ministry are now considered ordinary facts of secularised social life – all persons are of equal value and dignity, women are of equal value to men (that one with many lapses across the ages), children must be valued and respected, the sick, the poor and needy must be cared for, and social justice is important. Moreover, with the rise of national and increasingly bureaucratic states and secularisation in the European and North American societies, many of the previously key services of the churches were systematically taken away from them – hospitals, schools, social welfare, poor relief. In South Africa, during apartheid, there were also political reasons for the state divesting the churches of any control over schools and hospitals.

The need for ministry to the poor, the needy, the exploited and oppressed has again come to the fore as neo-liberal economies create greater and greater disparities of wealth and governments reduce welfare support (once provided via progressive taxation) that has led to the strain on

and near collapse of welfare and hospital systems. In addition, wars (there are five ongoing wars – in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Palestine, Yemen, Syria and Ukraine) create international destabilisation and floods of refugees. In South Africa there is a common perception that the Church as a prophetic voice in society went into hibernation post-1994. Whilst concurring with the renewed understanding of a deacon as an agent of *diakonia*, as a commissioned person and not a menial soup-kitchen worker (as per the misinterpretation of Acts 6:1-7) there is a need for the aspect of diaconal organisation and activity to be revived.

Third, deacons exemplify the task of ministering to the world (and keeping the worshipping community alive to that task of *diakonia*). As Hartley (2014) puts it:

“An embrace of a revised definition for diakon-terms, while of course not refuting true Christian humility, may help the diaconate (and the Church as a whole) embrace the radical missionary values of God’s reign whereby the whole Church brings the whole Christ to the whole world.”

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3. Towards a contextual theology of the diaconate

“They are called to build bridges between the Church and the world, and to be an expression of the unconditional love of God.”

(Scottish Episcopal Church, 2021)

“Deacons are agents of the church in word, action, and attendance, who lead the people of God in carrying the light of Christ into places of darkness.”

(North American Association for the Diaconate)

Present understandings

The recent revitalised understanding *diakonia* means that many churches have moved away from the idea that the diaconate is an inferior order dealing with social welfare activities to free up the other orders of ministry to deal with a more ‘spiritual’ ministry. The diaconate is increasingly seen as a full, equal, and distinctive order of people attending to the business of *diakonia* under the oversight of the bishop and presbyters in a threshold ministry that brings together liturgy, proclamation and service to the world (as it is believed, it did in the early centuries of the Church), particularly in time of crisis in contemporary society.

“The Early Church combined liturgical ministry with social responsibilities without neglecting either of the ministries. This elicits the question, what can the interactionist ministry of the deacon contribute to effective ministry in times of crisis? On the assumption that the deacon is involved in both the sacramental ministry of the liturgy of the Last Supper and provision of social services, what kind of diaconal ministry is suited for urbanisation and the subsequent crisis such as the displacement of people and redefining of spaces?”

(Klassen, Louw and Muller, p. 163)

Recently, in 2019, the Scottish Episcopal Church changed its ordinal to reflect both the regained understanding of the deacon as one sent, commissioned, and mandated as an operative of the Church focussed on the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and also the long accepted function of the diaconate to serve and advocate for the needy:

“In the name of the Church, deacons are sent to declare the kingdom of God and to care for those in need, serving God and the world after the pattern of Christ. They have a commitment to outreach and witness, advocacy and prophecy, flowing from their historic ministry for the poor, needy and sick, and seeking out the careless and indifferent. They are called to build bridges between the Church and the world, and to be an expression of the unconditional love of God.”

(Scottish Episcopal Church, 2021, p. 2)

An order of transformation

Clark (2023b, pp. 4-5, 2023c, pp. 1-3) makes an interesting distinction between the order of the presbyterate as being an order of **continuity** (having care of and celebrating the theology and tradition of the institutional Church and working to help the gathered people of God live and work as part of the Kingdom of God through worship, learning and pastoral care) and the order of the diaconate as an order of **transformation** (being part of a movement to bring the gifts of life, liberation, love and learning and servant leadership to transform society and the world).

The point Clark (2023b, p. 5) makes is that the balance between continuity and transformation is needed because continuity alone leads to stagnation and introversion, a focus only on transformation tends to fragment and weaken.

The unmaking of the transitional menial deacon

The new understanding of *diakonia* stimulated by Collins's semantic and exegetical work on the New Testament *diakon*- words has thoroughly demolished the view that the deacon is the ecclesiastical equivalent of a menial and at the same time ended the idea that the Seven in Acts 6:1-7 were deployed to organise a soup kitchen. Similarly, the idea that the deacon is a transitional deacon – a priest in training – and in this phase expected to exhibit the demeanour of an abjectly humble priestly apprentice is totally inappropriate.

Generally, though various Anglican communions have considered the idea of the direct ordination of presbyters without an intervening transitional diaconate, the likelihood is that there will be an insistence that the transitional diaconate¹ will remain, even if the practice of the presbyter remaining a lifelong deacon and a bishop remaining a lifelong deacon and presbyter is seldom explicated and is theologically unexamined.

Avoiding the social-work *cul de sac*

Because of the record of the past millennium and a half of misconstruing a deacon's function there is still a tendency to pigeonhole permanent deacons as social workers or food bank organisers or justice advocates.

The new understanding of *diakonia* sees this as a dead end. The deacon's work is the business of *diakonia* in its fullness. It is not restricted to these particular good works or the organising of these good works. It may just as well be evangelism or confirmation instruction or pastoral visiting or whatever.

This is not to say that the sending out of deacons to do precisely social, economic, welfare and justice organising is not to be encouraged, and in the present Southern African context may well be a growing priority. But it must not be seen as the sole characteristic of the distinctive diaconate.

1 The term 'transitional deacon' is a somewhat unfortunate one, suggesting that the deacon is literally changing into something different, a presbyter (caterpillar into butterfly?), rather than, whilst always remaining a deacon, receiving an additional ordination as a presbyter, thus being both deacon and presbyter in the same way that a bishop remains a presbyter even when elevated to the episcopacy. Sadly, it has become a generally accepted and well-understood term.

Where is the deacon located?

What a deacon is can be heavily influenced by where deacons work (and therefore, who has immediate authority over them), there are two contemporary tendencies here. The one is to at least nominally reaffirm the ancient link between bishop and deacons and to see diaconal work as extraordinary ministries directly under the oversight of the bishop.

“Deacons function in ministries of liturgy, word, and charity. They serve directly under the bishop of a diocese and help to carry out the bishop’s ministry. Bishops normally assign deacons to special responsibility for mercy and justice. *Dioceses usually require that prospective deacons already serve in specialized ministries among the poor, sick, and oppressed.* Once ordained, deacons exercise leadership among the faithful, encouraging, training, and organizing them for various ministries. In many ways the vision of the historic diaconate has become a reality in our time.”

(Anglican Church of Canada, 2023)

The Scottish Episcopal Church has clearly spelled this out in several reports, in 1987, 2018 and 2020:

“It must be clearly stated that Deacons, while being communicant members of congregations, having a liturgical ministry and dovetailing with the work of presbyters, are primarily a task force at the disposal of the Bishop, for work, most of which is out in the world. They have their proper place in a diocesan rather than a congregational strategy of mission. They are a pioneer corps rather than auxiliaries to share the load of existing intra-congregational ministries.” (1987, p. 12)

“Deacons work closely with the bishop, and may also serve within a congregation.” (2018, p. 8)

“In liturgical attendance on the bishop, and in discharging such pastoral and administrative functions as may be delegated by the bishop, the deacon represents and extends the presence and ministry of the bishop him- or herself. It is instructive to observe the role of the deacon in the **Apostolic Tradition**: to attend the bishop (8:2) and *report to him who are sick so that he, if it seem good to him, may visit them.* Their ministry is primarily to the bishop (8:2), rather than to those to whom the deacon extends the ministry of the bishop. This conceptualisation of the diaconate survives almost verbatim in the classical English and Scottish Ordinal already mentioned: the deacons are *to search for the sick, poor, and impotent . . . to intimate their estates, names . . . to the Curate*; the Curate here being the rector, the priest instituted by the bishop to the cure of souls in the congregation, and who stands in the place of the bishop in overseeing the work of the deacon in that context.” (2020, p. 53)

The question is whether the idea that the deacon is the bishop’s assistant and agent in a meaningful sense is an anachronism. The problem with this approach is that in the current context, with about one bishop per 100 to 250 presbyters, genuine direct oversight of deacons by the bishop may seem impractical and would only work for relatively few deacons in specialist non-parish-based ministries reporting directly to the bishop or in teams deployed by the bishop.

The other tendency accepts that the local presbyter is the *de facto* the equivalent of the bishop of a congregation in ancient times and locates the work very much in the parish in its interface with the world.

This issue is complicated by the existence of the transitional deacon who is being trained as a presbyter by the priest in charge of the congregation where posted.

Avoiding the pitfalls of the institutional context – or ‘What about the lay-ministers?’

Taking the position that a theological understanding of the diaconate must always be contextual is always a double edged sword. The pressure of the context may twist or malform the theology rather than the theology be precisely configured to address the context with the full imperatives of the gospel.

The development of the three orders took place under circumstances where a typical congregation of less than a couple of hundred people would have a bishop, several presbyters and several deacons. That context, in which the language of an Ignatius about the relationship between bishop, presbyters and deacons made direct sense, has not now existed for more than a millennium and a half. The current institutional church context, in which a single bishop oversees at a great remove hundreds of lone presbyters in charge of congregations with no deacons and in which the pressures of secularisation and late neo-liberal industrial capitalism steadily reduce the number of, and the churches’ capacity to finance, stipendiary ministers, poses both a challenge and a temptation to find solutions that will be only palliatives to a now untenable situation.

In this difficult context, the issue of lay-ministers comes to the fore as it can be argued that one reason for both the expansion of lay-ministries (and even the restoration of the diaconate) is the shortage of presbyters. As a Scottish Episcopal Church document puts it (2020, pp. 26-27, 29, 35):

“The last century has seen an exponential increase in the range of activities in the life of the Church in which lay people have exercised leadership, and also in the numbers of both men and women who have assumed such responsibilities. Despite this, and perhaps precisely because this has consisted largely in incremental delegation to lay people of functions which there are no longer sufficient numbers of clergy to perform, the identity and vocation of the lay Christian, both in terms of Anglican ecclesiology and ecumenically, remain vague and ambiguous. The process which has brought increasing numbers of lay Christians into ministerial roles in the life of the Church has not been guided so much by theological insight into the significance of Baptism, as by the practical demands created by declining clergy numbers.”

“Declining clergy numbers have made the Church increasingly dependent on lay people, certainly in ways which never strictly required the presence or action of a priest or deacon in the first place, but also in liturgical and pastoral activities which have traditionally been the function of the clergy – which is not the same as those restricted to the clergy by Church discipline or reserved to the ordained as a matter of theological principle. In absorbing the time and energy of increasing numbers of lay people, and drawing them away from life and witness in the world to maintenance of its own structures and routines, the Church has in many ways turned in on itself, and thereby arguably accelerated its own decline. Furthermore, in effectively giving priority to traditionally clerical roles, the Church, intentionally or otherwise, implies that these are more important than those activities in and through which lay Christians have, over the centuries, been the “leaven” which has brought Gospel values to bear upon life in the world.”

“The question needs to be asked whether the Church, in monopolising the spare time of its more committed and public spirited lay members, is thereby contributing also to the decline of voluntary associations and charities, through which its lay members previously exercised their mission in the world and made the contacts on which evangelism depends. It might be suggested that this theologically ill-considered development has denuded the Church of its most effective agency in its mission outward to the world. ... When the time and energy

of committed Christian laity is increasingly absorbed into the institutional life of the Church, and in liturgical leadership, to compensate for the lack of clergy, faithful lay people are being clericalised and the work of the laity neglected. ... The reaction of the Church to decline, both in clergy numbers and in lay adherence, has generated a collective introversion which, unless reversed, will simply aggravate and perpetuate that decline."

"If an Anglican polity is to be an effective vehicle for Christian mission, then it will need to be recognised that the increasing delegation to lay people, with or without training, authorisation, and supervision, of the functions traditionally reserved to the ordained, is not an exercise of the priesthood of all Christians, but rather a symptom of the decline and introversion of the Church. In Baptism the Holy Spirit consecrates and empowers the lives of Christian people in the world. As a priesthood they worship God corporately, but at the end of the Eucharist they are sent out into the world, there to love and serve the Lord."

This is a powerful argument and hard to refute. It suggests that any genuine attempt to restore the diaconate requires a reform too of the presbyterate and of the current inability to grasp the nettle of the proper and effective place of self-supporting ordained clergy.

A subsidiary argument is that the current emphasis upon training up and licencing lay-ministers should rather be directed towards a restored diaconate (much of whose work would be the empowering of the laity for their baptismally founded ministry in the world and, where genuinely appropriate, the training of lay-ministers).

Foundational principles for a theology of the diaconate

Any renewal of the diaconate should be grounded on:

- a theological foundation that must, inter alia, be linked to a theology of the baptismal vocation of all, and
- an understanding of the diaconate's relationship to the orders of presbyter and bishop and to the so-called lay-ministries,
- must take into account the revised understanding of the meaning of *diakonia* as the activities of mandated, commissioned persons who are operatives of the Trinity who calls all people to be servants of the kingdom community:

"The outcome of diakonia, therefore, must always be seen in the context of furthering koinonia, that is, of helping to further the coming of the kingdom community."

(Clark, 2023b, p. 4)

Clark (2023b, pp. 6, 7-12, 2023c, pp. 1-9), in distinguishing between the leadership work of bishops, presbyters and deacons, sees the bishops as an order of unity, the presbyters as an order of continuity and the deacons as an order of transformation.

As an institution, the church is primarily a community of place, of neighbourhood, where people gather to worship, learn and socialise and where, in worship and sacraments the church recalls and celebrates its Christian legacy and teaches its members on the practical implications of the gospel and exercise of the gifts of the kingdom community. The danger of the church as institution is stagnation and introversion, exacerbated by the ongoing secularisation of society which weakens the institution's ability to influence society. However, the Church is also a movement of transformation, and it is the people of God active in the world who are the diaconal church's essential resource for mission and engagement in, and transformation of a variety of non-neighbourhood communities of practice.

The basic ministry of the baptised

The ministry incumbent on all the baptised is well expressed in this formulation, adapting the Anglican Communion's 'Five Marks of Mission', made by the Anglican Church of Canada (2016, p. 15):

"The basic ministry of every baptized person is to be found in the baptismal covenant:

- (1) to continue faithfully in the worship and faith of the Christian community;
- (2) to resist evil and be ready to repent and return to that community;
- (3) to proclaim the gospel in word and deed;
- (4) to seek and serve Christ in all persons; and
- (5) to do justice, seek peace, and respect every human being.
- (6) to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and to respect, sustain and renew the life of the earth."

All Christians are, without exception, called to this *diakonia*, this ministry. Humble ministry and service to all in need is the duty of all Christians and not a specific mark of the diaconal ministry performed by deacons.

An ordained ministry

"The particular ministries of presbyters and deacons can only be understood within this context, as focussing, expressing and enabling the ministry of the whole people of God."

So states a 2004 Methodist Church document on *What is a deacon?* (p. 3). A theology of the diaconate must therefore be clear on what marks the special nature of the ordained ministry to be performed by deacons that assists the people of God to do this ministry, this *diakonia*. An attempt to express this position is found in these statements by the Anglican Church of Canada (2016, pp. 18, 19):

"Some are called, equipped, and ordained to embody diakonia as deacons, to exemplify to the faithful what it is "to serve all people, especially the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely." As such, they serve as icons of Christ, inviting us into proclamation and service of the gospel for the sake of the world."

"Ordination as a deacon is an affirmation by the church that an individual is being called to this distinctive ministry of service and agency, gifted and equipped to inspire and mobilize others into ministries of service, healing, and justice. They become sacramental signs of the presence of Christ in places of need and risk and vulnerability, in the faces of strangers and friends alike."

The Commission takes it as a given that the diaconate is an ordained ministry of people solemnly authorized and commissioned for servant leadership within the life of the church and in service to the world. As such deacons are expected to be highly committed and to have the requisite experience of both the Church and the community. They are also expected to be theologically trained individuals, so that:

"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."
(Church of Scotland, 2018, pp. 1-2)

Operatives of the Kingdom

The weight of the Biblical and historical evidence is that deacons are to be seen as mandated, commissioned persons who are operatives of the Trinity who calls all people to be servants of the kingdom community. They go out to bring people in across the threshold. They go out to encourage the faithful, to stand by them, as they do the work of the Kingdom. They go out to reach the unreached and the lost.

In military analogy they lead the ground troops. In espionage analogy they are the spies and reconnaissance agents of God in the world, sabotaging the forces of evil, building up networks of resistance in all spheres of society, setting up liberated zones of the Kingdom. And they report back home on what they have found and done to be re-supplied and re-directed for further missions.

A contextual ministry

The original deacons were not assistant presbyters. They had leadership of a Trinitarian commission that was both Church facing (in their liturgical role, in engaging the people of the Church in communal transformation, and in equipping and enabling), and world facing (as a catalyst, within the changing world contexts, working for the spread of the Kingdom, resisting injustice and lies, serving as intermediaries, bridge builders, network hubs, and partnering with what is good and positive in cultural and civic movements, and disrupting the complacent).

What that means in Southern Africa in the third and subsequent decades of the 21st century is hard to prescribe, given the rapidity of the changes in context. Indeed it is perhaps of the essence of a restored diaconate that its roles and functions must be constantly changing and responding to the context. This has consequences for the Church, for institutions that do not change, die. It was not for nothing that the Church of England named its 2001 report on the diaconate *For such a time such as this*.

To take some changing context issues that we are all grappling with at this time. On a massive scale there is climate change and ecological catastrophe (and to what extent is every congregation of the Church active here (and not diminishing the good work of ‘Green Anglicans’)), the hideous spectre of unemployment and lack of income generating work, a society festering with corruption, the social media, so full of promise but rapidly corrupted to be the purveyors of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (which congregants need to be informed about and armoured against), the collapse of effective education for a majority of children, and the list goes on. It is in this world that the world facing work of the diaconate must respond to.

Given the massive challenges of the contemporary Southern African and worldwide context it is important that deacons be not seen as solitary outriders and there have even been suggestions that a permanent diaconate should be seen as a kind of religious order, with both the duties but also the support and collegiality that such provides. The Methodist Church uses this religious order language (Methodist Church 2004, p. 11):

“Methodist deacons are not only members of an order of ministry but also members of a religious order known as the Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO).”

This suggests that a theology of the diaconate will need to be flexible and from which it will be difficult to lay down a prospectus, which means in turn, that definitions of the diaconate and the ordinals used at their ordinations need to be broad, and inclusive of many possibilities.

Towards a new ordinal

A revised understanding of a theology of the diaconate will require the development of revised definitions of what a deacon is and does and therefore, too, a revision of the ordinal.

There are number of recent Anglican Communion definitions of the diaconate that do seek to describe a contextually responsive diaconate such as these two:

Association for Episcopal Deacons (2022)

“A deacon is a baptized person called and empowered by God and the Church to be a model of Christ’s servant ministry for all people. As agents of God’s compassion and reconciling grace, deacons are missionaries to the world and messengers to the Church of the world’s needs, hopes, and concerns. In the Church, deacons call forth, empower, and inspire the baptized to respond to these needs. The role of the deacon in liturgy mirrors this role of the deacon in Church and world. Deacons are living symbols of Christ’s presence as they embody Christ’s servant ministry and point to the presence of Christ in those they serve.”

Scottish Episcopal Church (2018)

“Deacons are heralds of the Gospel, called to proclaim and make visible God’s love in word and deed. They seek out those in need to bring them the good news of the Kingdom, and bring the concerns of the world to the attention of the Church and its congregations, reminding them of their call to serve others in love in their mission to the world.”

We would argue that the ordinal for deacons should accordingly reflect the revised understandings and definitions of *diakonia* and of the deacon.

The *Book of Common Prayer* describes the deacon as a liturgical assistant to the priest and administrator and distributor of Holy Communion, a reader of the Scriptures and Homilies, a catechiser and occasional baptiser and preacher. In relation to ministry outside the walls of the church, “where provision is so made, to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate, that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.”

Whilst the liturgical base is secure, the external work, though important, is constrained by the “serving tables” interpretation of Acts 6:1-7.

A draft prepared in 2019 by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa Liturgical Committee has a statement of intent where the Bishop says:

“Brothers and Sisters, God calls us to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of our Lord Jesus Christ who has called us out of darkness into God’s marvellous light.

The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and one of the dwelling-places of the Holy Spirit. In baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God’s love and to work for the coming of God’s kingdom.

To serve this royal priesthood and to support its work of witness, God has given particular ministries.

Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission; as he washed the feet of his disciples, so they must wash the feet of others.

They are to lead God's people in the offering of praise and the proclamation of the gospel. They share with Priests and the Bishop in the Church, delighting in its beauty and rejoicing in its well-being.

With the Bishop and their fellow presbyters, they are to sustain the community of the faithful by the ministry of word and distribution of the sacrament, that we all may grow into the fullness of Christ and be a living sacrifice acceptable to God.

...

We are mindful that they will exercise this ordained leadership within and not apart from the communities which they are called to serve. For all ministry is dependent on our common discipleship of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The text reiterates the importance of the ministry of the baptized and the special role of the diaconate in the equipping of the people of God for diaconal ministry.

The charge is as follows:

"My sisters and brothers, you stand here today as God's dear children and members of the Body of Christ.

By baptism you and every member of God's Church have been called to witness to Jesus Christ as Lord of life, to proclaim him to the world and to follow in his footsteps.

God now calls you to a special ministry of humble service. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, and to seek out particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely.

By your word and example, you are to make Christ known to those among whom you live and work and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, the concerns and hopes of the world.

You are called to make disciples, bringing them to baptism and confirmation; to lead the people in prayer; faithfully to read the Scriptures and proclaim the word of God.

You are to assist the Bishop and priests in public worship and in the administration of the sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time.

At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving those in need, they are serving Christ himself.

As a deacon in the church you are to study the holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them.

This ministry will be your great joy and privilege. It is also a weighty responsibility which none would dare to undertake except for the call from God. To you whom God calls, God will always give the strength you will need."

Whilst these revisions can be considered a great improvement and can be compared with those in the Church of England's 2021 *Common Worship: Ordination Services*, they could have gone further.

What should a deacon be and do?

Should a theology of the diaconate, however contextual it is, seek to provide detailed guidelines, however provisional, about what a deacon should do, on what the functions or roles of a deacon are? This question is addressed in the next chapter.

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4. What should deacons be and do?

“The diaconate is at the same time the most problematic and the most promising of all the ministries of the Church. Some churches have been agonising about what a deacon is, while others have begun to discover what a deacon can be.”

Paul Avis (2009)

If there is to be a true restoration of a distinctive diaconate, the immediate question is, ‘What are deacons and what should deacons do?’ Such a question is needed because, certainly, in the light of the renewed understanding of the Biblical concept of *diakonia*, the current (1989) Southern African ordinal provides insufficient guidance in this respect. (We do recognise that other Anglican communions have undertaken recent revisions of the ordinal for deacons.)

We would argue that revision of the ordinal is necessary. However, an ordinal must necessarily deal in broad strokes with the work of the ordained deacon. What in more detail, as a practical guide (say to bishops), would be the potential work of distinctive deacons? And can a theology of the diaconate, however contextual it is, provide guidelines about what a deacon should do, on what the functions or roles of a deacon are? Indeed, a Scottish Episcopal Church study (2020, p. 53) is cautious about laying down a list of specific functions for the deacon:

“In its essence diakonía is not about particular functions, but about being commissioned and delegated by the bishop.”

Perhaps the real practical and situational difficulty with looking at the functions of the deacon is that, given that *diakonia* must be multiple in its potential activities, that the list of functions might be exceeding long.

Attempts at simplification

There have been various attempts at simplifying the matter by providing broad categories of roles and activities. For example according to Clark (2023c, p. 5 and also see Clark 2023d, pp. 102-106):

“a renewed diaconate has two core roles which are *church-facing*: **enabler** and **educator**, and three core roles which are *world-facing*: **catalyst**, **intermediary** and **partner**. The other roles identifying servant leadership – visionary and strategist – remain important and come into the picture as and when needed.”

The Diocese of Exeter (2023) states this:

“Distinctive Deacons have a strong call to an outward-looking and community-minded ministry. They prefer to be out and about, making contacts, building relationships, identifying and meeting needs, creating stepping-stones between God and the world. They often have a particular concern for issues of poverty and justice and many minister of those on the margins of church and society.”

Attempts at describing diaconal competencies

Another approach mimics the lists used in the training world of competencies required for various skills and professions.¹

So competency grids have been compiled to assist in the selection, growth, lifelong learning and support of ordained clergy in their work (such as those developed by Robert M. E. Paterson (in 2006) and Krita Ewert (in 2021) and used in North America and England respectively). These are now used in many provinces and dioceses. These usually take a staged approach, identifying particular expectations for selection time, ordination, and for lifelong learning after ordination.

An example of such a grid is attached as Appendix 1

1 In considering such an approach it needs to be understood that it reflects a tendency in secular education and training that became very influential in the late 20th century. The term ‘competence’ was originally associated with vocational training and skills development rather than understanding. Competence is concerned with what people **do** rather than with what they know and it always has a **context** which exists in **time** (one never does something in abstract but always in a context at a particular time). To reliably measure someone’s ability to do something there must be clearly defined **outcomes** and **standards** by which achievement or performance of those outcomes is measured and accredited.

Though there are many complicated definitions of competence in education and training textbooks most of the definitions acknowledge that competence has three main components, **knowledge**, **skill** and **attitude**:

- **Knowledge** means having the information and understanding required to perform a task.
- **Skill** involves the ability and strength to actually perform a task and not just talk or write about it.
- **Attitude** means having the necessary confidence, will, and motivation to perform a task. For example, if a worker does not have the confidence to complete a task, he or she is not really competent at that specific task.

The advocacy arguments for a competency-based approach are the following:

- there is coherence and clarity in what has to be taught and learned
- learning is measurable and, at least in principle, easy to assess
- competencies are more easily transferred from one context to another
- does not prescribe any one teaching approach.

Criticisms of the competency approach are that it:

- focuses too much on observable work
- competencies tend to be too generic
- meshes uneasily with academic education
- assumes that everyone is homogenous and needs the same basic skills and performance outcomes
- assumes a person is either competent or incompetent and deficient – nothing in between
- tends to be narrowly conceived and has an inadequate conceptualisation of human activity (in that it ignores many human qualities and wider notions of knowledge and understanding – for example, can a quality such as empathy be defined and taught?)
- arbitrarily divides up the holistic nature of a practice.

Latterly, there have been attempts to see competencies more holistically and almost as habits, as the Church of England’s 2021 *Formation Framework IME 2 for Ordained Distinctive Diaconal Ministry* puts it “we have moved away from Criteria which are to be met to **Qualities** to be inhabited” but these attempts merely mitigate the fundamental training world approach.

Looking at the past

It is possible to create a summary of what can be gleaned from the New Testament and Patristic sources on what deacons were and did. Whilst the early days of the diaconate as an official position within the early Church are obscure it is clear that they were initially the effective minister-operatives of the *diakonia* of the Church. The early deacons had multiple tasks, roles, missions. They led the outgoing transformative ministry of the Church and had a key role within the liturgical assembly of the Church which were presided over by what in effect was the bishop in council (of the elders).

Companion and co-worker of apostolic missionaries like Paul
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked directly with the bishop Executive officer of the bishop Gatekeepers of access to the bishop Checkers of the credentials of visitors from other congregations Information gatherers for the bishop Administrators of the Church's finances and assets Security officer and body-guards of the bishop in time of persecution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the regular celebration of the Eucharist Kept order in the assembly and ensured no favouritism in position or seating Presenters of the oblations Organisers of the sharing of the oblations Distributed the bread and wine both within the assembly and to those unable to attend (the sick, the imprisoned, women forbidden to leave the home) Involved in baptismal instruction, the actual baptism and penitence Ministers of the word though only some preach
Equippers of the laity for diaconal action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performers of a service ministry, for example to the sick and needy Having personal interactions with all congregants
Envoys, ambassadors or diplomats to other congregations
Ministers of outreach standing on the threshold of the church (a liminal ministry) bridging church and community
Modellers of the servanthood of Christ

What is clear is the link between their diaconal actions and their presence in the liturgy, their presence in the assembly and their going out to do *diakonia* in the wider world. Their servanthood is expressed in terms of their being servants of the bishop and respectful of the presbyters and in their humility in interactions with others.

What this suggests is that, though the status of the deacon has changed over the centuries and there may be a need to construct a new 'job description' for a renewed diaconate it could and should resonate with the old.

But in responding to the historical evidence, the present day question may not be so much 'What was a deacon?' as 'What is the *diakonia* of the Church and how may particular leaders within the Church galvanize the diaconal work?' That is both a historical and theological question and also a contextual one on how *diakonia* is expressed today.

Functions of the deacon

With some caution, here is a list of possible functions/roles – the work that deacons can do – derived from numerous church documents:

Function	Categories
Proclaimer	Apostolic missionary, Herald of Christ's kingdom
Ikon	Ikon of Christ, Model of servanthood, Minister of service
Worship leader	Liturgical worship leader
Interpreter of needs and situations	Interpreter, Needs reporter
Administrator	
Educator and equipper	Teacher and catechist, Information giver, Equipper
Outreacher	An outwards reaching minister
Liminal/Threshold/Bridge	
Collaborator/Partner/Team worker	
Networker	Connector, Messenger, Ambassador
Prophet and social justice activist	Prophet and social justice activist, Disrupter

On the following pages these functions are illustrated with quotations from various church documents on the diaconate:

Proclaimer	
Apostolic missionary	<p>They proclaim the Gospel in word and deed.</p> <p>“The distinctive diaconate is particularly appropriate where an individual feels strongly drawn to the missionary, go-between ministry, seeking out the lost sheep and bringing both the message of the gospel and the practical care that goes with it to the unchurched and, therefore, may be reluctant to proceed to priesthood with its additional responsibilities and constraints. The distinctive diaconate appears to be suited to those with an evangelistic gift, provided this is clearly related to the three basic dimensions of ministry, tied into the liturgy and directed towards the full sacramental initiation of new converts.”</p> <p>(Church of England, 2017, p. 2)</p>
Herald of Christ’s kingdom	<p>“Deacons equip the saints to be heralds of the gospel” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“Deacons are heralds of the Gospel, called to proclaim and make visible God’s love in word and deed. They seek out those in need to bring them the good news of the Kingdom, and bring the concerns of the world to the attention of the Church and its congregations, reminding them of their call to serve others in love in their mission to the world.”</p> <p>(Scottish Episcopal Church, 2018, p. 8)</p>

Ikon	
Ikon of Christ	<p>“Deacons are Jesus to the world and the church (St Ignatius)” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“The deacon who usually is from the community, or who has strong ties with the community, symbolised the identity of the community, and by exercising the calling as “servant” or “messenger” holds within the liturgy the identity of the community as the image of God.”</p> <p>(Klassen, Louw and Muller, p. 178)</p>
Model of servanthood	<p>“The basin and the towel are common images of the diaconal ministry reflecting the servant ministry of Jesus recorded by John in his gospel.” (Church of Scotland, 2018, p. 6)</p> <p>“Deacons are a visible reminder to the church of its own servant ministry. ... Deacons are called to model servant leadership ... Deacons are ambassadors for Christ’s servant ministry.”</p> <p>(Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p>
Minister of service	<p>“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.” (Scottish Episcopal Church, 2018, p. 3)</p> <p>“They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.”</p> <p>(Scottish Episcopal Church ordinal)</p>

The difficulty with the last two categories (of servanthood and service) is that it can be argued that all the baptised are called to servanthood (being directed by the master, the Lord) and may be directed into practical service of the needs of others. The counter argument is that if presbyters at the altar can represent the priesthood of all believers, then deacons can represent the servanthood of Christ.

Worship leader	
Liturgical worship leader	<p>“Deacons bring the world into worship, and worship into the world.” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“Within the diaconal church, a renewed diaconate’s participation in worship would facilitate a sense of common purpose, collegiality and mutual support between the church as institution and the church as movement, between it being a community of continuity and a community of transformation.</p> <p>When involved in the leadership of worship, a renewed diaconate’s task is not to clone the role of the presbyter nor to take on the task of presbyter’s assistant. It is to engage in those aspects of the liturgical life of the diaconal church which bring to the fore the Trinitarian commission to the people of God to be kingdom community builders in the life of society and world.” Clark, 2023b, p. 4)</p> <p>It can be argued that, important as it is to know what the deacon does at the Eucharist, it is even more important to understand why the deacon does it.</p> <p>“The Deacon’s traditional ministry in the liturgy represents the ministry of service and mission of the whole Church. This includes: calling the community to confession of their sins; proclaiming the gospel; preaching; leading prayers of intercession; receiving the gifts and preparing the altar for Holy Communion; assisting the president with the distribution of Communion; and sending the community out in the service of the Lord.” (Scottish Episcopal Church Diaconate Working Group, 2012, p. 7)</p> <p>“Deacons’ sacramental participation in the Eucharist flows out to the world in servant-hearted mission” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“The deacon as servant and messenger connects different communities by proclamation of the Word and dismissing of the gathered community into the urban community. The deacon as reader and preacher of the gospel proclaims the Word of God from the context of the community. The symbolic procession from the middle of the church to the pulpit is a confirmation of different communities that come together and draw capital from each other. The deacon also connects the different communities by pointing all people to the ultimate end of salvation for all. Both the Eucharist and the dismissal are commands to exercise agency of justice and peace.” (Klassen, Louw and Muller, p. 179)</p>

<p>Liturgical worship leader (continued)</p>	<p>The Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church (2020, pp. 57-58) states that:</p> <p>“The liturgical role of the deacon defines and reflects the pastoral relationships within which he or she exercises a wider ministry in the community, and defines also the authority which he or she exercises in discharging that ministry.”</p> <p>Lawlor (2023) argues that deacons have a role in liturgical renewal:</p> <p>“If the way we do Church is no longer relevant, how do we find out what the pastoral, spiritual, and “congregational” – and dare I say liturgical - needs of our current diverse groups are?”</p> <p>Tilady (2020, pp. 67-68) says something similar, that deacons have a:</p> <p>“translational role, to allow the liturgy to meet people in their own space and using their own language, instead of expecting them to adapt to our existing traditions, language, and liturgy.”</p>
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Interpreter of needs and situations	
Interpreter	<p>“Deacons are interpreters of the world to and for the church.” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“It is a ministry which is well placed to interpret the Church to today’s society, and interpret society to today’s Church.” (Church of Scotland, 2018, p. 1)</p>
Needs reporter	<p>They serve the community in which the church is set, bringing to the church the needs and hopes of the people. Many ordinals include this role, e.g.</p> <p>“[It is] a role associated especially with service, often in contexts of great social need; or lastly ... It is a diaconal role to make connections, to search out social needs and help the Church deploy its resources, spiritual, financial and practical into those needs.” (Southgate, 2020)</p> <p>It is not just a matter of reporting on materials needs. What are the spiritual and religious needs of Anglican church members of all ages, in this era of technology and information overload – of instant information? Further it is not simply an expression of a patronising needs meeting ideology but a genuine engagement with where people are with all their strengths, assets and needs.</p> <p>“Our contention is that ministry in the form of prayer, Scripture, and worship does not adequately address the neo-liberal and materialistic emphasis of urbanisation. What is needed is an urban ministry that contributes to a more wholistic approach to urbanisation. We contend that the ministry of the diaconate is more effective for a more inclusive approach to urbanisation. The diaconate addresses the shortcomings of the broad ministry of prayer, Scripture, and worship, and keeps in tension the liturgical and social responsibility ministries. The ministry of the diaconate engages with the narrow approach to urbanisation and the top-down approach of the church’s ministry towards urban regeneration.” (Klassen, Louw and Muller, pp. 168-169)</p>

Administrator	
Administrator	<p>This is a very ancient function of the deacon. Some deacons can specialise in church administration and also in charitable and social justice advocacy organisation administration.</p>

Educator and equipper	
Teacher and Catechist	<p>Teaching both of the faithful and in the secular world.</p> <p>They accompany those searching for faith and bring them to baptism, providing them with appropriate instruction.</p> <p>“Deacons bring people to baptism and confirmation” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p>
Information giver	<p>Deacons provide correct information to the faithful and correct instances of misinformation (incorrect information but which the sender thought was true), disinformation (information which the sender knows to be untrue), malinformation (false information designed to cause direct harm) that are rife in the social media used by most people.</p>
Equipper	<p>“The mark of true diaconal ministry is to foster the initiation of lay ministries galore – to pioneer and then hand over in order to be free again to pioneer.” (Scottish Episcopal Church, 1987, p. 15)</p> <p>“The deacon’s primary purpose is to enable others. Deacons also act as a model and sometimes pioneer too. They often possess specialist skills in some aspect of diaconal work yet always work collaboratively, helping others develop their gifts. It is in this sense that the deacon represents, rather than replaces” (Methodist Church, 2004, p. 3)</p> <p>“Deacons are ordained so the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission.” (Church of England, 2007a)</p>

Outreacher	
An outwards reaching minister	<p>“Deacons have a focus which is outwards from the church, encouraging the whole church to be Christ’s servant in the world” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>Deacons can engage in pioneering work to engage with:</p> <p>“those who are currently well beyond any contact with churches as currently formed (that is, it is not about those on the fringe of church; it is about those who never give church a second thought).” (Tiplady, 2020, p. 64)</p> <p>“Deacons are risk-takers and lost sheep-finders” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“Deacons are the heart, feet, hands of the church in the community.” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p>

Liminal/Threshold/Bridge

The term **liminal** refers to a threshold, whether a space between spaces or a time between times, or a middle ground between two grounds. When you are in a liminal space, you are neither here nor there, neither this nor that. At the same time, you're both here and there. It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing, therefore a liminal space is where all transformation takes place. During liminal periods of all kinds, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and taken for granted expectations called into doubt. It is where a situation can be reshaped and new institutions and customs established.

Liminal/Threshold/ Bridge

"The diaconate has biblical and apostolic origins that predate the presbyterate. The essence of diakonia has continued throughout history and across denominational lines in different forms, but with a consistent thread of identity that combines notions of both authority and marginality, of service and agency, especially arising from the edges of systems and institutions. The paradoxical position of deacons at the edge and centre of the church's leadership can be seen in their role of service in response to needs within and beyond the local community, as Christian educators, welcoming "outsiders" (strangers, seekers, newcomers, candidates for baptism) and bringing them into the faith community, and as caregivers, especially to those who are isolated from community life by illness, poverty, or injustice."

(Anglican Church of Canada, 2016, p. 19)

"Deacons are shown to have a liminal ministry that through its very existence and practice can challenge understandings of status and power that can exist between different groups such as those who are lay and ordained, those in the church and those in the wider community. Reflecting on this liminal ministry can help churches as they seek to make connections between worship, mission and service, by enabling the whole Church to put their faith into practice in their everyday lives as they engage with wider society. This is especially important in terms of reflecting carefully on the Church's response to those who are suffering, disadvantaged or marginalised."

(Orton, 2013, p. 260)

"The deacon is sent by the Holy Spirit to the forsaken. This is why it is crucial for the diaconate to remain a liminal vocation. The deacon lives at the doorstep between the culture and the liturgical mysteries so that he can see and hear the cry of the poor and lay these needs at the foot of the altar and the pastor. The deacon is also an ecclesial porter, opening the gates of mystery to those who desire to have their spiritual needs satisfied by God, and unbolting the doors of society to other clerics who may want to more deeply understand lay life."

(Keating, 2006, pp. 131-132)

"Increased secularisation has left a gap between the Church and the communities in which it sits. ... 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."

(Church of Scotland, 2018, pp. 2-3)

Liminal/Threshold/ Bridge (continued)	<p>"The Deacon as a bridge reminds the people of God of their call to cross over between church and community in both directions." (Church of Scotland, 2018, p. 7)</p> <p>"Deacons are bridge builders between church and community. ... Deacons welcome people across the threshold of the church ... and send them back out into the world refreshed and empowered." (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p>
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Collaborator/Partner/Team worker	
Collaborator/ Partner/ Team worker	<p>"The nature of diaconal work is collaborative. Deacons are trained and deployed to work in teams. 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." (Church of Scotland, 2018, p. 9)</p> <p>"Team working is not an optional exercise for the Diaconate, it is a core skill, critical to the distinctive ministry of the Diaconate." (Aitchison, 2003)</p>

Networker	
Connector	<p>"The deacon as servant and messenger connects different communities by proclamation of the Word and dismissing of the gathered community into the urban community. The deacon as reader and preacher of the gospel proclaims the Word of God from the context of the community. The symbolic procession from the middle of the church to the pulpit is a confirmation of different communities that come together and draw capital from each other. The deacon also connects the different communities by pointing all people to the ultimate end of salvation for all. Both the Eucharist and the dismissal are commands to exercise agency of justice and peace." (Klassen, Louw and Muller, p. 179)</p>
Messenger	<p>"Deacons are people 'on a mission, a messenger or ambassador — making connections between liturgy and pastoral need, building bridges between the life of the Church and those who are not yet within it'" (Church of England, 2017, p. 2)</p>

Ambassador	<p>“Deacons are people ‘on a mission, a messenger or ambassador — making connections between liturgy and pastoral need, building bridges between the life of the Church and those who are not yet within it.” (Church of England, 2017, p. 2)</p> <p>“An ‘ambassadorial’ role as one commissioned for a range of tasks – sometimes specifically in the service of the bishop – often tasks involving communicating between church groups or between church and world. ... the deacon is understood as trusted go-between. The one who explains to church people the thinking of their bishops, the one who relays to senior staff the impact of policies on the spirituality and morale of laity. Also one who makes and deploys those vital ecumenical connections that enable the people of God to work with unity in crisis, and the one whom the Church can send into liaison with local councils and charities, to bridge differences and catalyse action with common purpose, action moreover that prioritises, as the Church of God is always called to do, the needs of the poor.” (Southgate, 2020)</p> <p>“In exercising authorised leadership amongst others or acting as an ambassador, however, deacons are to remember the radical redefinitions of power, dignity, authority and leadership contained in the words and example of Jesus.” (Methodist Church, 2004, p. 3)</p>
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Prophet and social justice activist	
Prophet and social justice activist	<p>“Deacons are prophets, speaking truth to power. ... Deacons are the conscience of the church.” (Diocese of Exeter, 2015)</p> <p>“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.” (Church of Scotland, 2018)</p>
Disrupter	<p>A person who disrupts conventional certainties and comfortable beliefs and practices and opens up new frontiers and horizons.</p> <p>“When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17)</p>

Can one summarise and codify diaconal functions?

The above list is long and exhaustive with at least twenty functional categories. A similar problem arises with the competency grids developed for the diaconate.

Can these lists be summarised, condensed? Yes, in the sense that Clark (2023c, 2023d) has done with his broad areas of **enabler, educator, catalyst, intermediary** and **partner**, but these are very broad, particularly at the practical level of a deacon being deployed to particular activity. And, as was said when we looked at the theology of the diaconate, such a contextual theology will need to be contextual and flexible and inclusive of many options. Thus a list of functions such as we have developed should be seen as an indicative list of possibilities rather than a job description cast in stone.

The functions have to be seen contextually and flexibly. As the Methodist Church report of 2004 (p. 10) puts it:

“Similarly today, demands made upon the Church will change, and the form that diaconal ministry takes will vary from place to place and from deacon to deacon. It changes over time in response to the needs of the World and the missionary tasks of the Church. This means it frequently takes place beyond the margins of the Church and respectable society. Yet, whatever form diaconal ministry takes, deacons remain representatives authorised and sent by the Church, owned and supported as such.”

This returns one to seeing the need for a revised ordinal as one that would both hold the church-facing and world-facing aspects of the deacon together while being broad and open enough for a multitude of orientations for diaconal action.

The latest (2021) *Common Worship* ordinal from the Church of England does this quite well:

“God calls his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit. In baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God’s love and to work for the coming of his kingdom.

To serve this royal priesthood, God has given a variety of ministries. Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission; as he washed the feet of his disciples, so they must wash the feet of others.

...

Deacons are called to work with the Bishop and the priests with whom they serve as heralds of Christ’s kingdom. They are to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, as agents of God’s purposes of love. They are to serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people. They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.

Deacons share in the pastoral ministry of the Church and in leading God’s people in worship. They preach the word and bring the needs of the world before the Church in intercession. They accompany those searching for faith and bring them to baptism. They assist in administering the sacraments; they distribute communion and minister to the sick and housebound.

Deacons are to seek nourishment from the Scriptures; they are to study them with God's people, that the whole Church may be equipped to live out the gospel in the world. They are to be faithful in prayer, expectant and watchful for the signs of God's presence, as he reveals his kingdom among us."

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5. The current distinctive diaconate

Attempting to describe the current situation of deacons in the Anglican Church in South Africa is no easy matter. Attempts by the Commission to gain first-hand information on the experiences of deacons directly from deacons (via the list of deacons on the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons mailing list) proved almost fruitless. A questionnaire was sent to over a hundred distinctive deacons (many of them retired). Only 6 were returned (though one must note that a parallel questionnaire sent to Bishops asking for information about the number of deacons in their dioceses and how they were selected and trained) had a similarly underwhelming though slightly better response (5 out of 17)). So what is documented is necessarily anecdotal. But from what was received and many conversations with permanent deacons, several themes consistently emerge.

What the Bishops said

Information gained from five dioceses found 18 licensed permanent deacons. These distinctive deacons are seriously outnumbered by the priests (1 to every 15 priests). Most deacons are involved in parish ministry rather than out of parish or workplace activities.

Academic qualifications vary – the minimum is usually a Diploma but some had been ordained with a Higher Certificate or Diocesan training only (particularly for candidates who would serve in rural areas). There is usually some form of post-ordination training and oversight of deacons is usually by a Training for Ministries department or an Archdeacon.

What the Deacons said

On being called

Generally, most deacons had not experienced their call as one specifically to the diaconate but rather as a generic call to ministry – to be a servant of the gospel. So, for most the initial assumption was that a call to be a minister of the gospel was a call to be the regular minister, that is, a priest.

A very few found the call was to minister in their workplace context.

One received his call as it were indirectly, other people told him that he was called.

Some, having been appointed as lay ministers, experienced a call to deepen their ministry. One such expressed it thus:

“I found people wanting to share parts of life with me that held hurts/pain from the past. When I accepted to become a Lay-Minister this aspect continued to grow and realized that God was touching my life to fulfil a bridge building, of healing among the broken in society. This influenced my choice of calling to become a Deacon rather than a Priest.”

What were the academic requirements?

Few deacons made any comments on this. Some thought a theological degree was necessary. One idea on the formation required suggested the following:

"If we are to build church in a way that glorifies Jesus, we need to build His way. I would suggest that consideration be given to deal with at beginning, the character of the deacon as a person, then proceeding to general and more specific applications of the distinctive diaconal tasks in today's world: Pastoral care, Social justice and advocacy, Teaching, Community outreach, Worship leadership, and Church administration."

Experiences of the Fellowship of Vocation

Most found that the Fellowship of Vocation provided no guidance at all on the diaconate. There was usually an almost prescriptive assumption that everyone would become a transitional deacon for twelve months, then be ordained to the priesthood. At the Fellowship meetings few ordinands expressed any desire to be a deacon.

In addition, some found the Fellowship of Vocation experiences unstructured and unhelpful and very dependent on the subjective interests of the priest in charge. At the Fellowship meetings few ordinands expressed any desire to be a deacon.

Discernment

Few, if any, were given any guidance on the diaconal calling, either as an option, or in exploring its nature. Even bishops were seen as often pushing for a deacon to be soon made a priest as that was the real ministry – "You need to be a priest."

Some had the sense that being discerned by the authorities as a diaconal candidate rather than a priestly candidate, was second place prize, that they were not good enough or suitable enough for the priesthood. Some told, as a result of the discernment process that they would be ordained as a permanent deacon, were puzzled as to why (and admitting that they themselves were not knowledgeable on what a deacon was). Many deacons, even though ordained to the permanent diaconate, have aspirations to the priesthood.

A further problem arises when a person has been deaconed but the Bishop refuses to ordain them priest (whether from inadequacy or bad behaviour) and the deacon has no desire to be a permanent deacon.

One Deacon said this on discernment:

"[Discernment can be seen as] "a decision-making process in which an individual makes a discovery that can lead to future action." Through the process of spiritual discernment, God guides a person to arrive at the best decision. Consequently, the need exists to cater for an improved process of understanding the depth and scope of the distinctive diaconate and the role they can undertake in a parish – In meeting the needs of the marginalized and the vulnerable. Within the Fellowship of Vocation structure this should be done at the pre-selection stage for testing the vocation and then participating in the appropriate programme."

On being trained by a training rector

“Consideration for a Director of Diaconate training should be established within each diocese, to ensure a structured programme with checks and balances is in place to develop those called to this ministry.”

There seemed to be two divergent approaches adopted by training rectors. The first was to genuinely train the deacon (including transitional deacons) to be a deacon (whether that deacon was seen as an inferior or a colleague was variable). The other was to simply see the deacon as an apprentice priest and no specialized distinctive diaconal training was given at all.

The transitional one year diaconal period were often seen as too short and often negative – “You cannot do this! You cannot do that!” (i.e., ‘You are not a priest yet!’)

However one found the experience “wonderful” in which he was encouraged to do all the diaconal things, allowed to make mistakes, and encouraged to reach out to the community.

One serious problem with a transitional deacon who takes the diaconate seriously, who is soon or even immediately transferred to another parish once priested, is that much of the community engagement, outreach programmes and projects initiated by the active deacon is left directionless once the person is transferred.

Many felt that there was not a conducive environment for developing the new deacon.

There did not seem to be adequate instruction on how to make complaints about ones’ ecclesiastical superiors or mechanisms for doing so.

Experiences of the diaconate being seen as an inferior ministry

Two transitional deacons experienced their ministry as being “taken as an inferior ministry”; “deacons are on a lower grade”. Another gave an example of, after being approached by laity as an ordained minister with knowledge and authority, being then rounded on by the Rector as insubordinate – “Somebody thinks he’s the Rector!”

Experiences of deacons as self-supporting ministers

It seemed to be that most deacons or transitional deacons had difficult experiences with priests, particularly at the beginning. There were of course exceptions to this where the priest and parish was caring and fully supportive.

“Many was the time we felt as if nobody actually knew what to do with us as permanent deacons.”

Even long-serving self-supporting deacons (effectively permanently stuck in their home parish) found that the often rapid turnover of priests in a parish with a self-supporting minister could be nightmarish. One self-supporting priest described it as “a year of hell”. Another deacon was told by the priest “I don’t know why you are here.”

In addition, newly ordained ministers (and congregations) were told that worship/ritual/etc. had to be done in a new way (that the new Rector liked). There was genuine puzzlement that priests who presumably had been given the same theological education could be so diverse and dogmatic in their liturgical behaviour.

One described it thus:

"In my first parish posting the Priest/Rector was very autocratic and to some extent, my business skills, knowledge and education background were a threat to him. In consequence he treated me more like a glorified Lay minister – with no/limited scope for allowing my ministry to grow. Having raised this with the then Bishop, I was relocated to another small church. I can only say this priest understood what God given gift's I had as a deacon and allowed me to grow.

This is an area needing significant education and improved focus, as so many priests (and lay Lay people) do not fully understand the true role of a distinctive deacon and how to utilize the gifts possessed to the greater benefit of all.

As there are so few distinctive deacons at present, it may be beneficial to create a cluster formation where they can function well until we will know we have enough."

Being sidelined by prioritizing lay ministers

Sometimes deacons were replaced in services by a favoured lay minister. One was effectively barred from any liturgical ministry for years so as not to offend the lay ministers.

The case of well educated deacons

Some permanent deacons are the educational superiors of their parish priest which may cause problems (though of course it can also be a wonderful asset).

And some deacons grow in their knowledge – one distinctive deacon said he was perplexed by the fact that he couldn't understand what on earth the priest was preaching about. But this encouraged him to engage in serious theological study to a high post-graduate level.

Deacons' understanding of the diaconate

Most deacons admitted that their own initial ignorance on what a deacon was (except in some parishes where a deacon was active liturgically). They found general ignorance of the diaconate, including among the priests.

"Thinking about the diaconate today, I believe that it is a genuine ministry, that it is different to that of the priest (who is presider over the liturgical life of the parish and its overall guider and shepherd). I think it is more about the humble service to the people of the parish and outside the parish so that their lives may be truly abundant."

6. Renewing the full diaconal ministry – confronting the dilemmas

One of the major difficulties for a renewal is that the role of the deacon has been largely seen through the template of the priestly minister, against which deacons are seen as partly formed priests (transitional deacons) or failed to make it priests (permanent deacons). Clearly this problem has to be addressed. Similarly, the diaconate has also tended to be seen through another template applied to self-supporting clergy (often seen as inferior and purely auxiliary).

But beyond these essentially clerical perceptions is a wider challenge, as articulated by Clark (2023d, p. 86):

“the church ... has lost sight of the fact that the people of God in the world are its primary resource for mission. Clericalism, imprisoned within a parochial and pastoral model of church, remains embedded in every church. The church’s retreat into the sphere of the local and the private, given impetus by the Enlightenment and the march of science and technology, has resulted in its engaging less and less with the concerns of society and the wider world.”

So to reiterate, the challenge of renewing the ministry of deacons is only part of renewing the *diakonia* of the whole Church.

Distinctive and transitional deacons

For more than a millennium the only deacons in the Church in the West were transitional ones, that is, a short period after they were ordained deacon they were ordained to the presbyterate and so their diaconate became *de facto* a transitional period of practical training for the priesthood. Because of the doctrine of the indelibility of ordination, being a deacon is carried over into the period of being a presbyter in the same way that a bishop is still considered to be a deacon and presbyter. As retiring Bishop Margaret Vertue reminded her fellow bishops in a February 2023 sermon, “as bishops we remain deacons; instruments in the hands of God to make Christ known through our servant leadership.” (Anglican Church of South Africa, 2023). There is a problem with this somewhat ambiguous statement in that, though the reminder that they are still deacons is in accordance with the teaching on ordination, the suggestion is decidedly odd that a Bishop displaying servanthood is because they are a deacon rather than doing what is expected of any Christian who is a servant of the Lord, of any leader, lay or ordained in the Church. Deacons are not servants as distinct from the presbyters or bishops but servant leaders of *diakonia* alongside the servant presbyters and servant bishops

With the gradual restoration of the distinctive diaconate in many communions of the Anglican Church and in the Roman Catholic, Methodist and other denominations, radical suggestions have been made that candidates for the ordained ministry should be ordained either as deacons or presbyters from the start. A transitional diaconate before being priested is seen as somewhat illogical and in practice unhelpful. The transitional deacon, in usually less than a year as deacon, is in fact being trained up as a presbyter and the orientation is towards that office and role.

Incidentally, an argument can also be made for the separation of the ordination services for deacons and presbyters; a practice recommended by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa's Liturgical Committee..

We considered this matter and agreed that ideally the transitional diaconate should end and candidates be ordained directly to the presbyterate. Given that ending the transitional diaconate at this juncture may not be a popular move, we would argue two things:

- The period of the transitional diaconate should be extended to two years.
- Serious efforts be made to provide appropriate instruction on the theology and work of the diaconate during pre- and post-ordination training of both transitional and distinctive deacons. As the Church of England 2001 report states in its argument that the diaconal commissioning of all ministers is fundamental (p. 9):

“The diaconal foundation of all ordained ministry becomes all the more important when seen in the light of the recent rediscovery of the biblical idea of diakonia.”

Self-supporting deacons

The next problematic issue relates to the largely self-supporting status of most distinctive deacons. They too suffer from the common assumptions about what being a self-supporting minister does to your status and role.

Currently virtually all Anglican distinctive deacons are self-supporting. However, it might be important to stress that there is no bar on deacons also being stipendiary and it might be prudent to have some exemplar stipendiary deacons to make this point. One notes that in England all Methodist deacons are stipendiary.

When it comes to the selection of candidates for the diaconate it stands to reason and accords with tradition that the candidates have the ability to take on responsibility, make decisions, and gain cooperation from others, indeed, unless the candidate has some leadership potential it is hard to see how that person can be genuinely called to the diaconate (or the presbyterate). They must also have some intellectual grasp and understanding of the mission of the Church, of its teachings, and of the sources of, and contextual influences on, its teachings.

It also stands to reason that conceiving of self-supporting deacons (or presbyters) as merely an auxiliary ministry is a contradiction in terms, even if it is promoted as a solution to a shortage of clergy. To be a deacon in any real sense a person must represent the order of the church and must take appropriate responsibility and carry authority in local congregations (albeit under the oversight of the bishop and/or presbyter). Any “ordination” where the person is told expressly not to take responsibility or to maintain the appropriate order in the church, but to merely “assist” or scurry around as an ‘auxiliary’, helping those who do the ‘real’ ministry, is to empty ordination of meaning.

In the early days of the church it would seem that in many local congregations a group of presbyters and deacons, all with “secular” occupations, collectively shared the responsibility of ministry. It follows that any coherent theology of ministry must accommodate self-supporting and part-time clergy. As Gavin Morley’s thesis, *From Ministry to Mission*, which deals with the issue of developing a theological model for self-supporting ministry, puts it (1997, pp. 48-49):

“[A] model of leadership which is centred primarily on the stipendiary clergy cannot be justified theologically and is bad organizationally. It deprives the community of the spiritual leadership skills of those who are most connected with and most knowledgeable about

the local church community. ... There are no grounds, whether in scripture or otherwise, to distinguish theologically between stipendiary and non-stipendiary clergy in terms of hierarchy. Theologically there is no justification for not licensing all non-stipendiary clergy to perform the functions to which they are called. ... There should be no first- or second-class theological education but only appropriate theological education and status should in no way be dependent upon the level of theological education which a candidate for ordination has undergone. Accordingly, a self-supporting deacon should be competent and authorised to take on any of the normal responsibilities of a full-time deacon when occasion arises."

In this connection, the work of Roland Allen is instructive (Allen, 1927, 1960). For Allen, it was the responsibility of the local church to raise up spiritual leaders from its members. It had a responsibility to direct its own life. If the local church declined to accept that responsibility there was no way in which the church at large could somehow make do by sending in someone from outside the local church to minister to it by holding services. Hence, once ready, the natural, respected and mature leaders of a local community should be ordained as self-supporting 'voluntary' clergy. These non-stipendiary ministers were not 'half-time' or 'part-time' but part of a restructuring of the church to make mission more effective. They were not to be a money saving expedient to keep the existing stipendiary clergy going or to be their cheap and servile assistants. What stipendiary clergy should do was to be itinerant and apostolic, carrying out specialised functions such as evangelism and teaching.

Naturally, developments that have taken self-supporting ministers seriously have not gone uncontested. Traditional stipendiary priests have argued that self-supporting clergy are second rate and untrained. Other critics have foretold a decline in the educational standards of the clergy. Others have seen the growing dominance of a local community-driven self-supporting clergy as encouraging conservatism and reaction to change. Some of these issues, which were beginning to be debated in the late 1970s, partly subsided because the matter of the ordination of women came to the fore (and, ironically enough, also increased the supply of traditional stipendiary clergy). But the matter of the self-supporting clergy remains a real issue that will have to be addressed, particularly given the financial and sociological constraints of these times.

Women deacons

One of the dangers in the current age is that, unlike in the past, when a majority of married women were homekeepers and hence available for much of the housekeeping and social support of the local parish church, the commissioning and deploying of female lay ministers and deacons will be seen as a way of reviving this "women do the church housekeeping" role.

The nature of society is changing and the issues that arise from that on how we do Church cannot be addressed by reinstating a dying past.

The opposition to a restoration

The historical demise of a distinctive diaconate in the West came about because they were supplanted by the presbyterate (see Chapter 1, pages 7-8).

It cannot but be expected that a significant number of presbyters will resist a restoration of the diaconate, not, we believe, from genuine theological grounds but because it threatens their own sense of authority, a not unexpected position given the prevailing unBiblical model of the single presbyter in charge (often autocratically) of a congregation.

As the early Church expanded and entered into an ambiguous concordat with the Roman state, the balance between the bishops, elders and deacons changed. The Church had to continue ministering effectively. Whether the changes that were made in response to a changing situation were the optimum ones is debatable – a huge expansion in the presbyterate who *de facto* replaced the relatively fewer bishops and with a decline in the status and number of deacons. It now has to be considered whether the model we ended up with in the 20th century is in need of restructuring in the 21st. It also has to be considered that a renewal of the diaconate for these ‘new times’ of necessity requires re-looking at bishops and presbyters too.

From the history of the rise and fall of the diaconate it is clear the ostensible reason for the downfall of the diaconate was clerical politics – and the Church failed to address (and halt) the conflict between the presbyters and the deacons. Yet the deeper causation was that the church did not timeously adapt church organisation and structures (and the leadership in them) to changing times. It is appropriate that the 2001 report from the Church of England on the renewal of the diaconate was titled “*For such a time as this*”. It is precisely the changing times and the need for the Church to adapt so that its *diakonia* remains effective that must drive any diaconal order reforms. Ironically enough the 2001 report was rejected because Lay Readers (a highly institutionalised group in the Church of England) saw a renewed diaconate as a threat to their status.

It is also precisely in times of stress and change that political conflict (and by political we mean “the art of living together in community” which includes whatever has to do with power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of resources or status) can be at its worst. Any attempt to renew the diaconate as an order within the Church must take into account the historical clash between the powers and status of presbyter and deacon (and more latterly between lay-ministers and deacons). In other words, a renewal of the diaconate must also be simultaneously a renewal of the presbytery (and the episcopacy). The current context – and one thinks here of growing secularisation in the world, growing inequality in society, immiseration for often majorities of people, ecological and pandemic disasters, the general decline of respect for truth and the growth of misinformation through social media, decline in clerical vocations and church finances – indicates change and difficult change.

Renewing a diaconate will involve ecclesial changes that will inevitably involve church politics and resistance to changes in status and power. And the bishops will have to accompany the changes with clear teaching on *diakonia*, the diaconate and the orders of ministry.

Deployment

There are a number of possible models for the deployment of a restored distinctive diaconate: Episcopal, Archidiaconal, Team, Congregational, and Order.

Episcopal

The historical narratives about the diaconate stress that deacons are the bishop’s assistants and are hold delegated/designated responsibility for teaching and administering certain Church tasks. It is the bishop they answer to and serve. The deacon is the bishop’s helper and executive. It is the bishop who deploys them to their various tasks. The problem is that though this may have been the case in ancient times, it is no longer generally true in any direct sense. Transitional and distinctive deacons are deployed in exactly the same way as the presbyters and have little if any direct contact with the bishop.

Various Anglican documents have reiterated this idea that the deacon serves directly under the bishop, as with the Anglican Church of Canada (2023):

“Deacons function in ministries of liturgy, word, and charity. They serve directly under the bishop of a diocese and help to carry out the bishop’s ministry.”

And the Scottish Episcopal Church (1987, p. 12):

“[Deacons] primarily a task force at the disposal of the Bishop, for work, most of which is out in the world. They have their proper place in a diocesan rather than a congregational strategy of mission. They are a pioneer corps rather than auxiliaries to share the load of existing intra-congregational ministries.”

The practical problem with this attractive model is that it is very difficult under current bishop:clergy ratios, that is, if the bishop is going to be expected to have some degree of practical oversight.

Archidiaconal

This is really a variation on the episcopal model. A senior member of the clergy would be the director and (real) archdeacon of the diaconal team of the diocese and would handle their deployment in and outside of parishes, their ongoing training, etc.

An alternative would be that deacons would be deployed to an archdeaconry, not a parish, and be under the direction of the regular archdeacon. Whilst quite an interesting idea for the deployment of transitional deacons (who can gain experience of a variety of parishes, etc. rather than be only sent to one) it has its dangers of an archdeacon having a team of deacons who can be sent hither and thither filling in when presbyters are on leave, etc. The only possible criterion should be that it is a ministry of complementarity, not supplementary.

Team

This model would have the bishop largely deploy distinctive deacons only to places where there were effective clergy teams.

Congregational

This is the existing model, with the downside that self-supporting deacon may be sent to serve in a parish that is not his or her home parish. An alternative model of deployment is that along the lines of Roland Allen’s vision of a congregation generating its own clergy.

Order

The Methodist Church, having given equal status to both presbyters and deacons tends to speak of the deacons as being in an order (not simply in the sense of there being orders of deacons, presbyters and bishops but as a religious order. It is not clear what this would mean in practice, but it does suggest, as with religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church, that the order would have a certain degree of self-governance and a specific rule of life.

Learning from the Anglican and other communions

Although the issue of the diaconate has been on the agenda of Lambeth and other Anglican gatherings now for over 60 years, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa has been slow to take it up, except for the abortive 1981 Commission that was scuppered by a clique that got the report thrown out without even being debated by the Provincial Synod of 1982.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, the restoration of a distinctive diaconate has made considerable progress in the United States of America and Canada, Scotland and less so in England. In other denominations there is a great growth in the distinctive diaconate – in the Roman Catholic Church more than 10 % of the ordained clergy are now distinctive deacons and in the Methodist Church deacons now have equal status to presbyters. While simply doing what others are doing is not necessarily a good reason to do anything, it may be that the “signs of the times” are not being noticed sufficiently in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. Is it the time for decisive action to resolve these challenging dilemmas?

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7. Deacon discernment, training and support

A renewal of the diaconate will require considerable revamping of the processes for the discernment, training and the support given to deacons wherever they may be deployed.

The enhancement of each of these processes should not be done in isolation from the others, for unless there is a clear linkage, stage to stage, the benefits of each will be reduced.

Deacon selection – Who is likely to be called?

A person perceives that they have received a call to minister in the Anglican Church. Is it likely that this person, having received what might be said to be a generic call to be a minister of the Gospel, will be aware of the the real possibility of being ordained to the diaconate rather than the presbyterate? Probably not.

This issue is likely to remain the case until a sufficient number of distinctive deacons are active in the Church and are visible exemplars of deaconhood as distinct from the priesthood. As one New York deacon trainer said, "When a person seeks advice on hearing a call to ministry, 'Don't speak to a priest, speak to a deacon'."

What this means is that there should be more pressure for Fellowships of Vocation (or equivalent) and documents, manuals, and websites of the Church to provide information about the ordained ministry that showcases the distinctive diaconate as a real option. There must be clear information outlining the path for candidates who want to be permanent deacons rather than presbyters.

Currently, only one of all the Southern African dioceses (the Free State) has a website that has information on the ordained ministries. Generally, the ACSA diocesan websites are bereft of any information pertaining to the matter of the ordained ministry within the church.

There are clear vibrant examples of how to present such information in many provinces and dioceses of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Some have websites, information documents and manuals for guiding prospective transitional and distinctive deacons (of the manuals see the two from the Episcopal Diocese of Northern California (2015a, 2015b) and that from the Diocese of Newcastle, 2022).

Information is also available from associations or networks of deacons, such as those in the United Kingdom and North America.

Church of England

<https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/no-ordinary-ministry#na>



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Distinctive deacons

Building bridges between church and society

What do distinctive deacons do?

A deacon's ministry is marked by mission through service. Deacons are outward moving and community minded.

Deacons prefer to be out and about, building relationships, identifying and meeting needs, and creating stepping-stones between God and the world.

Deacons are radical in their outlook and ready to try new ways of serving God in the community.

Deacons have a particular concern for poverty and justice, seeking to be the voice of the voiceless, advocating for those on the margins, and loving those in need.

As ambassadors, deacons take the gospel into the community, bringing its needs back to the church for intercession and practical action.

Diocese of Exeter

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"Our Distinctive Deacons add to the richness of ministry in the Diocese by their concern for those on the margins of Church and Society, and in reminding us of the one

Episcopal Diocese of Arizona

<https://azdiocese.org/deacons-and-the-diaconate/>



Deacons and the Diaconate

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<https://www.anglican.ca/faith/ministry/om/diaconate/>

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Deacons walk together at the 2014 meeting of the Association of Anglican Deacons in Canada. Submitted photo

Church of England Network of Distinctive Deacons (United Kingdom)

<https://cofedeacons.org>

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Church of England Network of Distinctive Deacons. The header features the logo 'DEACON' with a cross and the text 'CofE Network of Distinctive Deacons'. A navigation menu includes 'Welcome', 'About the Network', 'About Distinctive Deacons', 'Discernment', 'Formation', 'Resources', and 'Contact'. The main content area has a welcome message: 'Welcome to the DEACON website!' followed by a paragraph: 'Distinctive Deacons in the Church of England are deeply-rooted in the church, while the focus and range of our ministry takes place outside the church in the community, and on the margins of church and society.' Below this are four image-based links: 'About the Network', 'About Distinctive Deacons', 'Are You Being Called?', and 'Resources'. On the right, there is a search bar, a 'Latest Blog Posts' section with titles like 'Deacons in the Diocese of Europe' and 'DEACONS NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2023 "BREAKING NEW GROUND"', and a 'Latest News' section with the title 'DEACONS NATIONAL CONFERENCE'. A 'Follow' button is visible at the bottom right.

Association of Episcopal Deacons (North America)

<https://www.episcopaldeacons.org/>

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Association of Episcopal Deacons. The header features a red cross logo and the text 'ASSOCIATION FOR EPISCOPAL DEACONS' and 'ENGAGING THE DIAKONIA OF ALL BELIEVERS'. A navigation menu includes 'HOME', 'ABOUT', 'PUBLICATIONS', 'EVENTS', 'RESOURCES', 'LINKS', 'GIFTS', 'SHOP', 'CONTACT', and 'CART (0)'. There are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and a search bar. The main content area has three image-based links: 'DEACON COMPETENCIES', 'DEACON RESOURCES', and 'DEACON MANAGEMENT'. Below these is a paragraph: 'AED is a membership association of persons and dioceses within The Episcopal Church whose mission is to increase participation and involvement of all baptized persons in Christ's diaconal ministry, especially by promoting and supporting the diaconate.' Below this are four links: 'BECOME A MEMBER / VOLUNTEER', 'DONATE', 'SIGN UP FOR ENEWS', and 'ADVANCING THE DIACONATE'. The 'AED NEWS' section includes a link for 'A3D | Archdeacon & Deacon Directors' Conference' with the text: 'New dates! June 22 - 24, virtual. Growing the Diaconate: Lifelong Learning. We'll discuss deacon competencies, deacon compensation and more. [Details & registration](#).' It also includes links for 'Deacon Video Series', 'Public Policy Advocacy Resources', and 'AED's new Board and Goals'. A photograph of two men, one in clerical attire, is shown at the bottom right.

Selection criteria – who is to be chosen?

The Church of England (Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council, 2014) has eight criteria for use in the selection of candidates to the ordained ministry that can be summarised thus:

- A vocation
- Embedded in the Anglican Church
- Commitment to a spiritual life
- Appropriate mature and stable personality and character
- Capacity to build healthy personal, professional, and pastoral relationships
- Leadership and collaboration
- Faith that is personal, knowledgeable, vibrant and communicable
- Intellectually capable of theological study, ministerial preparation and the demands of ministry

This list is admirable, though, being of a very general nature, it does not specify exactly how these criteria would be applied in practice (though the full document does provide considerably detail).

One way of addressing this is the use of the Theological Education for the Anglican Communion (TEAC) competency grid and others developed in the Anglican Communion and found extremely useful. They can be used at various stages of the deacon's trajectory – at selection, at ordination, after three years, etc. (See Appendix 1). Several dioceses have found them extremely useful though they may be seen as possibly over-detailed. Some good examples of these for deacon selection and support are:

- Anglican Communion.org. 2006. *Theological Education for the Anglican Communion. Deacons, Catechists and Licensed Lay Ministers Target Group. Vocational Deacons.*
- Association for Episcopal Deacons (North America). 2018. *Competencies for Deacons 2017 (First Revision, 2018).*
- Church of England. 2021. *Formation Framework IME 2 for Ordained Distinctive Diaconal Ministry. Document 1: Qualities and Evidence.*

These resources may well be of value in the selection process of a person who has felt a call to, or is directed towards considering, the distinctive diaconate.

Evidence of church based activities and leadership

It could be argued that a candidate for selection should already occupy some leadership or service role in a parish, such as being a server, youth group leader, etc. Given the strong liturgical role that deacons are by tradition meant to play, it would be useful if candidates had some previous training and service as servers or lay-ministers (including what is done by an acolyte in the sanctuary, namely, lighting the altar candles, carrying candles in procession, preparing the wine and wafers, and generally assisting the presiding presbyter at the Eucharist, as well as what is done by the person leading the intercessions).

It is recognised that there is much variety in what lay ministers do. Some, exercising the role that was previously called the sub-deacon, may perform a totally liturgical role as a sort of older senior server. On the other hand, a lay minister may be exercising a ministry little different from that of a presbyter except that he or she cannot perform certain sacramental actions (like

celebrate the Eucharist). Midway between these two is a more regular position where the lay minister is a genuine “elder” of the parish (though not necessarily on the parish council) who sub-deacons, takes portions of services, reads and preaches and leads the prayers, and may exercise other ministries such as parish visiting and ministering to the sick and housebound.

Discerning signs of genuine leadership potential may be difficult but is still important – unless the candidate has some leadership potential it is hard to see how that person can be genuinely called to the ordained clergy.¹

In the Catholic Church in South Africa their post 2016 programme for diaconal selection and training requires a year’s period of discernment and involvement in programmes at the parish level as a pre-requisite for acceptance. The emphasis in this period is on four areas: Human, Spiritual, Intellectual, Pastoral.

Human

The candidate must provide a record of interaction with others in parish and community and be active in a parish ministry (such as reader, minister of Holy Communion, Parish Council member, Liturgy Committee, Fund Raising Committee, etc.). The person must be known to be trustworthy, responsible and mature in parish and community, respectful of genuine authority, and if married, in a stable and cared for family.

Spiritual

Evidence of a deep prayer and sacramental life, humility, generosity, keenness to learn more about the faith, the scriptures and the church.

Intellectual

Good communicator with clarity of thought and speech and must be able to understand, read and write English.

Pastoral

Involved in parish ministries and community affairs, committed to helping others, able to coordinate and lead others. The candidate has to be attentive to the physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs of the parish under direction of parish presbyter and other parish deacons.

1 One of the difficulties with current church practice as applied to candidates for the stipendiary clergy is the premium on young people without dependants with limited life experience and limited evidence that they have leadership potential. It is clear how we got here (Aitchison, 2003, p. 3):

“The words and life of Jesus stressed that genuine authority and leadership arise out of, are the reward so to speak, of humble service. The way in which presbyters (priests) have been selected in recent centuries is the reverse. Authority is given by appointment (after some pre-service training) and it is hoped that presbyter will be a person who will be a leader (and a leader who serves with humility). Indeed, service as a grounds for authority was nearly extinguished (as too was a genuine role for deacons who were now simply trainee priests). Leadership exercised by a collective group of elders generated by the local congregation was eliminated and an external leadership of one or a very few presbyters imposed upon local congregations. What originally reflected seniority and collectivity, in due time became subject to the bishop, and then became the personal responsibility of the individual presbyter – now the manager and administrator of the parish (as Rector). The individual presbyter-priests now ruled with the bishop as super-priest.”

Deacon education and training

Introduction

The Anglican Church has long had the tradition of requiring an educated clergy and, in many countries (notably North America), it has the reputation of having a well educated laity (albeit, influenced perhaps more by class background or aspiration than dedication to the pursuit of knowledge). This is a tradition that we would argue to be a good one and that, with due consideration to the need to serve the people of God wherever they are and whoever they are, certain guidelines could be laid down in relation to the educational qualifications and competencies of aspirant distinctive deacons.

General education and training

Should there be a minimum level of **initial ministerial education** (IME) expected of a distinctive deacon candidate?

In South Africa, the level for candidates for the stipendiary presbyterate has for a long time effectively been the National Senior Certificate with a Diploma level or Bachelor level pass (which is normally required for admission to Diploma or Degree level studies at a higher education institution (a university or the College of the Transfiguration or Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC)).

For self-supporting candidates for the presbyterate or the distinctive diaconate, who were usually of mature age, this minimum level was frequently not adhered to. Undoubtedly there was often need to qualify the general rule to cope with the anomalies where people of high intelligence and often educationally speaking very competent did not have the formal general education qualifications. Such cases would need to be assessed on an individual basis to check that their educational competence would indeed be adequate for pre-ordination study.

Theological education and practical training

Should people to be ordained as deacons have substantial formal initial theological training (more or less equivalent to that which a transitional deacon would have had) or is any theological education beyond a solid, basic Christian education and a set of TEEC courses overkill?

Unfortunately, there is no consensus on this question, either on the formal education level or on the mode of delivery.

Typical options are:

1. Common training (including some specialised courses on the diaconate)

The Church of England 2001 report recommended the following (p. 62):

“Does a distinctive diaconate need a distinctive training? We believe that both those candidating ultimately for the presbyterate and those candidating for the distinctive diaconate should undergo a basic common training, which will include a preparation for the diaconate, since all are to be ordained deacon. In addition, there should be special alternative modules, designed in the light of this report, for those selected for the distinctive diaconate.”

This would suggest that both Church sponsored (i.e., the future stipendiary ministers) and the self-supporting ministers should undertake the same programmes (whether delivered by university, residential seminary or Theological Education by Extension). Their exit qualifications would be on the same educational level.

It must be assumed that the content of programmes should include some material directly relevant to the diaconate.² This would also be important for those who would become transitional deacons.

2. Same qualification levels but specialised for the distinctive diaconate

It could be agreed that thoroughly specialized training is needed to make the diaconal ministry effective. But any such theological training offered should be of high quality and easily accessible. So the training would be at the same levels as those for presbyterial candidates but specifically tailored towards distinctive deacons.

If there is to be such a specialised initial basic training programme, ideally it should be piloted with a student cohort of appropriate and viable size and hence may need to be done by a provincially authorized training institution and programme and not be merely diocesan or regional.

It also needs to be noted that if some deacons are to be deployed into secular workplace situations – education, prisons, social work, administration – they will need appropriate professional credentials to enable their participation in these places.

The possibilities of ecumenical co-operation could be explored here with the Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches.

3. Diocesan (or regional) programmes at an approved level

Diocesan programmes have tended in the past to have sustainability issues, as they have waxed and waned under the impact of low numbers of candidates and the turnover of effective programme directors.

The attractiveness of the diocesan model is that if there is an initial spurt of ordinations of distinctive deacons in a diocese, then an in-house programme run at a Diocesan or regional level (supported by TEE College courses) for a cohort might be less costly and not need long term sustaining on that scale. Most diocesan programmes would probably include formal qualifications or part-qualifications via TEE College.

There are both local and foreign examples of these diocesan programmes that usually also make use of a TEE component.

The Diocese of the Highveld had planned though not implemented a two year programme with TEEC courses followed by ten training events. Candidates had to demonstrate competence in Academic studies, including the Holy Scriptures, theology, and the tradition of the Church; Diakonia and the diaconate; Human awareness and understanding; Spiritual development and discipline; and Practical training and experience. The training events included ones on traditional topics as well as contemporary issues such as 'safe and inclusive church' training and anti-racism.

2 Note: discussions were held in March 2023 with TEE College on the development of specifically deacon orientated courses. This would be most easily done with the Higher Certificate (National Qualifications Framework level 5).

The Diocese of Newcastle in England has a seven year programme, the first three years spent gaining a conventional Theological Education Diploma, which can be upgraded to a degree in the next four year phase of seminars and residential sessions on theological and ministerial subjects, including Biblical Studies, Doctrine, Ethics, History, Spirituality, Mission, Ministry, Pastoral Care and Theology, Preaching and Communication. In England a number of these national (such as the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham), regional or diocesan training programmes access qualifications accredited by the University of Durham.

The Diocese of New York has a four year programme. The academic formation (Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Theology, Ethics and Mission) is provided by Education for Ministry courses provided by the University of the South, Sewanee (Tennessee University of the South, 2023), with small groups meeting weekly with a tutor (appointed and given a small stipend by the University) and supported by a Diocesan co-ordinator. A parallel diocesan component has seminars, 200 hours of clinical pastoral training and two different placements (Diocese of New York, 2023b). The Diocese of Washington has a similar set up but the academic formation component is provided by the Church Divinity School of the Pacific based in Berkeley, California. It also requires two placements, one of which is a parish, the other a Church agency or secular organisation.

In the United States of America most of the initial academic training of deacons is done through what is effectively Theological Education by Extension methods and increasingly the online variant of that. Attention is also starting to be given to ongoing lifelong learning opportunities for deacons. There are efforts to have an agreed national curriculum and programme.

The Roman Catholic Church in South Africa has a four year programme: two years of TEEC study (at Certificate level), one year of practical training by the Board of Deacons, and one year in a minor order (Candidate, Lector, Acolyte).

4. Different qualification levels and programmes depending on situations

This is essentially the current situation, depending very much on episcopal decisions at the individual candidate level. It is generally considered somewhat unsatisfactory.

Post-ordination training

There must be ongoing theological education development through post-ordination training for a period of four years (as is the case in, for example, England).

If diaconate is taken seriously then there is need to consider extending the period that a 'transitional' deacon spends as an active deacon. At least some of the post-ordination training in this period should be diaconate orientated rather than presbyterial.

In this context, the concept of diaconate as apprenticeship for those to be ordained to the presbyterate needs to change. Though it may be right and proper that the church should select its presbyters from among its deacons, what needs to change, however, is the idea that in this time as deacons they are learning how to presbyters. Rather this period should be one of learning how to be a deacon, so that when the person concerned is ordained priest, he or she will have a better understanding of the work of a deacon and will be able to work with deacons in the future when they are a presbyter.

Support for the ordained deacon

Whether they are in self-supported or church-supported deployment positions, deacons should receive appropriate and adequate support, particularly in the early years of their ordained ministry.

Support via appropriate deployment

Deacons should be eligible for both self-supported and church-supported positions (and in the latter they should be on the same stipend scales as presbyters in assistant posts).

Preferably deacons could serve in:

- ministry teams (and especially those with an outreach focus)
- staff teams of major parish churches and cathedrals
- specialised non-parochial diocesan ministries (including that of Diocesan administrators directly under the oversight of the bishop)
- church and charitable non-profit organisations.

The gifts, talents, and experience of the deacon should be considered in deployment decisions, as well as the ministry needs of the diocese.

When assigned to a parish or team, there should be consultation between the bishop, the person in charge of the parish or team, the church wardens and the deacon. The deacon deployed to a parish should have an annual written letter of agreement with the presbyter, vestry, and bishop.

Full membership of Church bodies

As a member of the ordained and licensed clergy, the deacon should take a normal part in synods and regional councils, archdeaconry clergy meetings, parish councils, etc. (or stand for election to them). Diocesan Acts may need to be adjusted to deal with the representation of deacons as the voices of deacons need to be heard in these institutional bodies (See the *Covenant Agreement for Deacons of the Diocese of New York* (2023a).

Pastoral support

Deacons need to be given the requisite pastoral support and this is particularly the case where the deacon's work is not embedded in a parish or other ecclesial community and the deacon may, as an individual be somewhat isolated. Similarly, deacons may be in parishes where the rector may display little enthusiasm for working with deacons and some means of providing pastoral support external to the parish may be needed.

One option is for each newly ordained deacon to have a mentor appointed, as is the case in New York.

Diaconal support bodies and networks

The Roman Catholic Church in South Africa has a Board of Deacon that looks after the interests of this order. It would be desirable for the ACSA to institute a similar body.

A number of Anglican provinces have networks of deacons. Notable ones are the *Association for Episcopal Deacons* (2023), a merger of previous associations in the United States of America and Canada. It is currently well funded but at best 30% of deacons are members and it is trying to increase that number. It also offers financial support for the training deacons to lower the costs the trainee deacons have to pay for. The United Kingdom has the *Church of England Network of Distinctive Deacons* (2021). Southern Africa has the *ACSA Fellowship of Deacons*.

The Church of England Network has a “champion bishop” or patron in the House of Bishops, in Southern Africa the Fellowship has representation on the Provincial Standing Committee and a Liaison Bishop.

The Diocese of Exeter has a College of St Philip the Deacon which is a support body for all distinctive deacons in the diocese, headed by a deacon Warden which offers training and general support (Diocese of Exeter, 2020).

The difficulty with Networks is that of sustaining them with limited financial support and finding the necessary volunteers to keep up regular communication with members, ensuring that websites are up to date and topical, and holding regular events and Annual Conferences.

Internationally there is the Diakonia World Federation (DWF) network and the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons has members on some of the DWF and the Diakonia Region Africa and Europe (DRAE) bodies.

Financial support

Although most deacons will be self-supporting they should be eligible for fees and pension rights that other ordained clergy enjoy.

For example the Diocese of New York pays all self-supporting deacons a stipend of \$25 dollars a month so that they are eligible to join the pension fund, not for the pension *per se*, which would be minuscule, but so that they can gain access to certain benefits allied to the pension fund, such as cheaper life insurance, medical insurance, etc.

In many countries aspirant deacons have tended to be middle-aged people who have the resources such as pensions, accommodation, etc, already secured. In New York it has been argued that gaining young deacons requires a re-look at the funding available to deacons to subvent their incomes.

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8. Consequent actions required with a renewal of the diaconate

A general position

We would argue that deacons should be eligible for both self-supported and church-supported positions (and in the latter they should be on the same stipend scales as presbyters in assistant posts).

The gifts, talent, and experience of a deacon should be considered in deployment decisions, as well as the ministry needs of the diocese, a process in which the Diocesan Bishop plays key role.

When assigned to a parish, there should be consultation between the bishop, the person in charge of the parish, the church wardens and the deacon.

The deacon shall have an annual written letter of agreement with the presbyter, vestry, and bishop.

Deacons could preferably serve in ministry teams (and especially those with an outreach focus), staff teams of major parish churches and cathedrals, specialised non-parochial diocesan ministries (including that of Diocesan administrators directly under the oversight of the bishop), and in church and charitable non-profit organisations.

The deacon should take a normal part in synods and regional councils, fraternals, etc. (or stand for election to them). Diocesan Acts may need to be amended to deal with the representation of deacons as the voices of deacons need to be heard at these forums.

But, to make all this possible and to create an enabling environment for a new group of distinctive deacons, certain actions need to be taken relating to the following:

Canonical

Liturgical

Synodal

Provincial support

Diocesan support

ACSA Fellowship of Deacons

Canonical

Restoring a full permanent diaconate would require the reformulation of several of the canons of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Here are our suggestions for amendment of the current (2020) canons:

Canon 18:3 Deacons	
18:3 (c)	
In this clause the language of “Permanent” and “Transitional” Deacon is inexact and confusing and theologically dubious. One does not “transition” from a deacon into a priest. All people ordained as deacons remain deacons lifelong, even if they subsequently are also ordained as priests or bishops with a different focus of ministry.	
Currently 18:3 (c) reads	18:3 (c) A Deacon, whose vocation, as far as may be discerned, is to the Permanent Diaconate, shall be a permanent Deacon, and a Deacon intending to seek admission as a Priest shall be a transitional Deacon, subject to written notice of such intention in each case having been given, to the Diocesan Bishop concerned and the Bishop consenting thereto.
We suggest the following revision:	18:3 (c1) A person, whose vocation, as far as may be discerned, is to remain solely in the diaconal ministry, shall be given written notice of such discernment (and the appropriate training suggested by it) by the Diocesan Bishop concerned.
	18:3 (c2) A person, whose vocation, as far as may be discerned, is in the presbyterial ministry, shall be given written notice of such discernment (and the appropriate training suggested by it) by the Diocesan Bishop concerned.

<p>18:3 (d) and (e) NEW</p>	
<p>Currently the Canon says nothing about the criteria for a person to be ordained as a deacon nor of what duties that office implies. Both for those who remain permanently as deacons and for those who will also be ordained as priests it is important to have greater clarity on the diaconal role they both are expected to perform.</p> <p>The 1989 ordinal has a number of references to the criteria for being ordained as deacon as well as the role expectations.</p> <p>On the criteria for being ordained deacon these include being “of godly life and sound learning” (p. 575, [7]) and in the ordinal a number of implicit characteristics are highlighted – servanthood, humility, constancy and the potential to interpret the needs and concerns of the world, study the scriptures, teach and preach (pp. 583-586 [28, 33]). The 1954 <i>A Book of Common Prayer – South Africa</i> (itself a revision of the English 1928 revision of the <i>Book of Common Prayer</i>) adds diligence and modesty (p. 683).</p> <p>On the role expectations the Preface (p. 572) states “the Deacon, as the title indicates, represents the Church in the service of all who need its help. ... to be sign for all of his justice and love.” and Section 13 states that they “serve your Church and reveal your glory in the world” (p. 577, [13]). The charge to the deacons [p. 583 [28]] says “God now calls you to a special ministry of humble service. In the name of Jesus Christ you are to serve all people, and to seek out particularly, the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely. As a deacon in the Church you are to study the holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. By your word and example, you are to make Christ and his redemptive love known to those among whom you live and work and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, the concerns and hopes of the world. You are to assist the Bishop and priests in public worship and in the administration of God’s word and sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times your life and teaching are to show Christ’s people that in need they are serving Christ himself.” In the laying on of hands (p. 586 [33]) these words are said: “... Make them faithful to serve, ready to teach, constant in advancing you gospel. ...”</p> <p>The 1954 <i>A Book of Common Prayer South Africa</i> states (p. 681): “It appertaineth to the office of a Deacon, in the church where he shall be appointed to serve, to assist the Priest in Divine Service, and specially when he ministereth the Holy Communion, and to help him in the distribution thereof; and to read Holy Scriptures in the Church; and to instruct the youth in the Catechism; in the absence of the Priest to baptize infants; and to preach, if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop. And furthermore, it is his Office, where provision is so made, to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate, that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.”</p>	
<p>We suggest the following wording be added as 18:3 (d) and (e)</p>	<p>18:3 (d) Criteria for ordination to the diaconate</p> <p>A person called to the office of deacon should be living a Christian life characterised by servanthood and humility and to have shown constancy in this for a substantial period of time. The candidate should have an appropriate level of general education and be well grounded in the teachings of the Church and its scriptures. He or she must show the potential to interpret the needs and concerns of the world, study the scriptures, teach, preach and lead.</p>

18:3 (e) The duties of a licensed Deacon

The duties of a licensed Deacon shall be set out in a Memorandum of Agreement that encompasses the following activities:

1. Providing service to the Church and all people and particularly to the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the sick and the needy;
2. Proclaiming God's Word in the Holy Scriptures, and in particular to read the Gospel in the church;
3. Assisting in the ministration of the holy Sacraments and particularly in the administration of Holy Communion;
4. Instructing and preparing candidates for Baptism and Confirmation;
5. Baptising in the absence of the Priest;
6. Preaching where licensed to do so;
7. Interpreting to the Church the needs, the concerns and hopes of the world;
8. Performing such other pastoral duties, not reserved to the ordained ministry, as the Bishop or Incumbent may determine;
9. Devoting regular time to the study of Holy Scripture other studies relevant to the work to be done;
10. Generally ministering in a way that advances the Anglican Communion marks of mission that are:
 - To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;
 - To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
 - To respond to human need by loving service;
 - To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;
 - To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

<p>Canon 25: Of the tenure of the clergy and Canon 26: Of residence of the clergy</p>	
<p>These Canons really speaks to the situation of stipendiary and non-stipendiary priests and not at all to that of deacons, though technically they may be covered.</p> <p>Although this is another issue, given that many distinctive deacons take up this non-stipendiary ministry later in life and an many come into their, so to speak, ministerial prime after retirement from their secular employment, the retirement age of 65 is somewhat restrictive.</p>	
<p>We suggest the following section be added to Canon 25:</p>	<p>The licensing, tenure and retirement of deacons</p> <p>The licensing of the deacon to a particular office in the Church, whether it be in a parish, extra-parishional or general, is done by the Bishop of the Diocese.</p> <p>Where a new rector is appointed to a pastoral charge, the licence to any deacon or deacons, stipendiary or non-stipendiary, in that pastoral charge is to be reviewed by the Bishop.</p> <p>If the deacon is stipendiary he or she has to retire at the age defined in the rules of the Provincial Pension Fund – currently this is aged 65 or 66 (the latter for those who joined the pension fund before 2003). A deacon who is non-stipendiary has to retire at the age of 65.</p> <p>The Bishop, after such consultation as the Diocesan rules may prescribe, may extend the licence of the Deacon who has reached retirement age for a further period not exceeding 12 months. This may be extended year on year, at the discretion of the Bishop. In addition, Deacons who have retired may continue to minister if given Permission to Officiate by the Bishop.</p>

Liturgical

Traditionally, deacons performed certain liturgical roles: reading the Gospel, leading the intercessions, saying the acclamations in the Eucharist, calling to say the Lord’s Prayer and giving the dismissal, as well, as at Easter, singing the exultet. Only the latter is specified in a rubric in *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989* as being read by the deacon (and compare for example the explicit references to what the deacon should do in the United States of America *Book of Common Prayer 1979*).

The Liturgical Committee needs to continue to examine the various revisions for a new prayer book or additions to it to ensure that, where appropriate, a deacon is also specified.

Of more importance is the need to revise the ordinal. The Liturgical Committee should be requested to review the Ordinal in light of current scholarship and best practices, and present to the next Provincial Synod a revision of the liturgical text for the Ordination of a Deacon.

Deacons, and the clergy in general, need a guide on the liturgical role of the deacon. A good example of such is the Diocese of New York’s *Liturgical Guidelines for Deacons* of 2022.

Synodal

A criticism can be made is that if there are a substantial number of deacons added to the clergy then the size of synods will swell to unmanageable proportions.

In response it can argued that a simple distinction can be made here – some clergy are part of the synodal government of the diocese and some are not.

One can point to parallels in institutions such as universities where the old tradition that all professors had seats on senates has been replaced by the practice of only heads of schools or departments being eligible. The rationales for such developments are, invariably, ones of costs and logistics rather than principles (given the modern Anglican stress on the participation of the laity in synodical government, the more clergy there are the more laity have to be present and this leads to growing costs for all). However, whatever the merits and demerits of having only a special group of clergy in synod, the means by which the synodal governors and the non-governors are currently distinguished (only stipendiary clergy for example) has elements of absurdity.

We believe that whatever means are taken to determine the number of people attending a diocesan synod, those means should not distinguish between stipendiary and non-stipendiary clergy or exclude deacons. For reasons of cost and logistics, a fair system of representation on synod of both presbyters, deacons and laity be instituted (which might mean clergy and laity being elected on a regional basis with some proviso that the bishop be entitled to select a limited extra number of persons to attend synod).

Provincial support

A renewal of the permanent diaconate will, given that bishops ordain deacons, require provincial support from the House of Bishops and a variety of provincial support mechanisms.

Publicising the report

Initially, if the report of the Commission is accepted by the Provincial Standing Committee and then the next Provincial Synod, it will need publicity and study. The Commission indeed requests that the Archbishop initiates a study of the report within the House of Bishops and that the development of a study guide and supportive resources to accompany the report be considered for use provincially and at diocesan level. It can be used in the review of existing guidelines and practices with respect to the diaconate.

In terms of general publicity the report should be sent to the:

- International Anglican Standing Commission for Unity, Faith, and Order of the Anglican Communion
- People responsible for ministry training in the Province (both Anglican and ecumenical such as TEE College)
- The Church Unity Commission churches, namely Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa, and to the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference Department for Formation, Life and Ministry of Clergy, and to the National Council of Deacons.

- Diakonia Region Africa Europe (DRAE) and the DIAKONIA World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities

Better prominence to information on ministry

There needs to be better information on the diaconate on the provincial website which ideally should also have a section on the ACSA Fellowship of Deacons). The current website compares very unfavourable with that of many other communions where there is substantial information on the three orders of ministry and on guidance to those who have received a call to the ministry.

Organisational support

Some mechanism of organisational support might be required at provincial level, analogous to the Roman Catholic Church's National Council of Deacons which aims to:

- To bring uniformity to training throughout Region
- Be focal point for all matters affecting deacons
- Provide guidelines to Diocesan Deacon Boards on all functional aspects of ministry
- Provide feedback to the Department responsible clergy ministry
- Recommend on-going formation programmes

Certainly some body or committee would need to determine patterns of funding for the education and continuing education of deacons to ensure that it is accessible to all deacons

Similarly support would need to be given to encourage and support a network of deacons (the current ACSA Fellowship of Deacons) and deal with issues of diaconal representation on Provincial Standing Committee and Provincial Synod.

Diocesan support

An appropriate equivalent form of support is needed at Diocesan level, particularly in relation to Fellowships of Vocation, and pre-and post-ordination education and training.¹

ACSA Fellowship of Deacons

The ACSA Fellowship of Deacons played a pivotal role in the last decade in generating a serious discourse about the place of distinctive deacons in the life of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa. Although strongly supported in only a few dioceses it now suffers from the reduction in new ordinations to the permanent diaconate and the retiring of its most active committee workers. It is represented on the Provincial standing Committee and at Provincial synod. It has strong international links with the DIAKONIA World Federation and has had members on some of its international committees.

1 One of the recent dysfunctional oddities of the over-formalisation and over-regulation of higher education qualifications by the Council for Higher Education is that TEE College can no longer bear the administrative red-tape burden and cost of having local tutors for groups of students. This need for tutors of their students studying through TEE College is something that the Dioceses should respond to. It is notable that the distance education training of deacons in the United States of America has very strong local tutoring support for the groups of students.

As has been experienced in other parts of the Anglican communion, networks such of this have a certain fragility because of their reliance on voluntary enthusiasm and a lack of financial resources to hold annual conferences and workshops. In general, such networks require official champions amongst the leadership of the province or region and official status.

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9. Conclusions and recommendations

The Commission, within the context of the call by Provincial Standing Committee to “all dioceses to nurture and promote the ministry of distinctive deacons within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, was instructed to “investigate the ministry of the distinctive and permanent diaconate”.

The Commission made a serious attempt to examine the evidence on the history of the diaconate in the context of a revitalised understanding of the very idea of *diakonia*. What comes out of that investigation is ambiguous in that it is impossible to say “this is what the New Testament means by a deacon” or “the early church had a clear definition of the deacon”. But what is clear is that deacons were in the forefront of ministry in the early days of the Church and may have been its first ‘ministers’ at a time when ‘presbyters’ were simply the elders of the congregation, one of whom presided at the Eucharist. That deacons were named deacons indicates that they were centrally involved in the whole of *diakonia* which, it is now clear, is the whole action of the sent Church including the ministry of the word and organisation of the Church and the activation of its care for others in the world. The sentness to do *diakonia* is not some footnote on the history of the ordained clergy but a call to respond today, in our context, to the divine mission given by the resurrected Lord to his Church.

What this means is that a call for the renewal of a distinctive diaconate is not some anachronistic appeal to the past but rather a challenge to the Church of today to see that the fullness of the Church’s *diakonia*, being sent by God to serve his purposes in the world, is implemented. And we believe that a restored and distinctive diaconate would be vital to that, though it can also be said that a renewal of the presbyterate and the episcopate is also needed. The traditional three orders may well need a thorough revamp.

What excited us was the exploration of the many things that deacons are and can do (as shown in Chapter 4). It is here that we see the transformative ministry that could be exercised by a distinctive diaconate. It is this that impels us to call for a major renewal of the diaconate and all the consequences that flow from such a renewal, which will require determination and courage.

We reiterate the conclusion of the 1981 Commission report:

The Commission affirms that the diaconate of the Church is that of Jesus Christ its Lord. This diaconate is to be exercised by all the members. The ordained order of deacons exemplifies and enables the total diaconal ministry of the church. ‘The sole purpose of Church order is to make room for the Spirit to carry out his work of edifying the church (and we must add – saving the world) – with as little hindrance as possible.’

The Commission believes that the time is here for a serious restoration of the distinctive diaconate.

Recommendations

Restore the distinctive diaconate

1. ACSA needs to clarify the distinctiveness of the ministry of deacons, in relation to the other two orders, and in relation to the crisis-ridden context of our times, in which we believe God is calling upon us to revive the diaconal order.
2. There should be a concerted effort to end what is often perceived as the prejudice and discrimination against the diaconate at various levels, and this also applies to how transitional deacons are treated.
3. The option of ending the transitional diaconate and ordaining people directly to the presbyterate should be seriously considered.
4. Ordination services of deacons and presbyters should be separated as far as possible.
5. If the transitional diaconate is retained the period should be lengthened so that transitional deacons can be trained for, and have a real experience of, the diaconate, rather than only be treated as apprentice priests.

Teach about the nature of *diakonia* and the distinctive diaconate

6. ACSA needs to educate itself anew on its call to *diakonia* and of the place of ordained deacons in galvanizing this ministry.
7. The Province needs to be educated on the nature and role of the distinctive diaconate.
8. Study material on this report should be generated and distributed.

Settle on an interim discernment and training process

9. The urgent creation of relevant vocational discernment and training information, processes and resources is required.
10. That the Commission or some other body be asked to continue the work done by this Commission, with representatives from theological training institutions and diocesan diaconal training programmes, to develop recommendations on a curriculum and programme for the education and training of deacons.

Establish a provincial support mechanism for the diaconate

11. A person should be appointed to a provincial position to oversee the renewal of the distinctive diaconate and their education and training, and wherever possible, this should be echoed at diocesan level. The Bishops are requested to find truly suitable posts for deacons, notably in team ministries.
12. The Province endeavor to deal with the inevitable changes, canonical, liturgical, and synodal, and the support needed to develop an effective network for the diaconate (the Fellowship of Deacons), that a true restoration of the distinctive diaconate would require.

Postscript

The entrancing novel by James MacBride, *Deacon King Kong* has these descriptions of a Baptist deacon in New York:

Elfante nodded. "what does a deacon do?" he asked.

"How should I know? She said. "They're probably like priests, but make less money."

...

Elfante smiled. The old dud had a style about him. "Okay, Deacon. By the way, what does a deacon do?"

Sportcoat grinned. " Well now. that's a good question. We do all sorts of things. We help the church. We throw out the garbage. We buys the furniture sometimes. We shop for the food for the deaconesses to make for the repast and such. We even preaches from time to time if we is called upon. We does whatever needs to be done. We're your holy handyman."

We pray that the holy handymen and handywomen of the diaconate in Southern Africa today and in the future will gain the recognition that is required.

Appendices

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**THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION
DEACONS, CATECHISTS AND LICENSED LAY MINISTERS TARGET GROUP
VOCATIONAL DEACONS**

	<p>Vocation and Discernment</p>	<p>At selection evidence should be shown that ...</p>	<p>At ordination evidence should be shown that ...</p>	<p>After three years in orders evidence should be shown that ...</p>	<p>Before involvement in training others for the ministry evidence should be shown that ...</p>
<p>Candidates have an understanding of their gifts, abilities and traits, have practical experience of lay ministry and have been encouraged by their church community in assisting with specifically diaconal tasks.</p> <p>Candidates are able to speak about their sense of vocation to ministry and mission, referring both to their own conviction and to the extent to which others, particularly the local church community, have confirmed it; this sense of vocation should be obedient, realistic and informed.</p> <p>Candidates have a heart and passion to find Christ in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned and to lead Christian people in the loving care of the poor, sick, lonely and needy, along with the importance of advocating for them.</p> <p>Candidates have an awareness of Anglican-Episcopal tradition and practice within the local church and are willing to work within this framework and process.</p>	<p>Ordinands have a deepened and enriched sense of their gifts and an awareness of possible tension between the personal and ecclesial aspects of ministry to which they are being called.</p> <p>Ordinands should be able to articulate clearly their sense of vocation specifically to ordained diaconal ministry, including the charge to interpret the needs, concerns and hopes of the world to the church, as well as to show that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.</p> <p>The local Anglican community as been prepared and is willing to receive a new deacon.</p>	<p>Deacons are able to give a clear account of their vocation to diaconal ministry and explain how that vocation has been exercised during the preceding three years.</p> <p>Deacons have had the opportunity for a episcopal review of their ministry, asking what skills need to be strengthened, what is working particularly well, what the perceptions of the community are, and what resources are available to strengthen and reaffirm the ministry.</p> <p>The particular community to which the deacon is assigned continues to accept and welcome his/her ministry, is willing to work with him/her in the gospel and to allow him/her the space for spiritual, mental and emotional growth.</p>	<p>Deacons have seen others move into diaconal ministry.</p>	<p>A.1</p>	<p>A.2</p>
<p>A.1</p>	<p>A.2</p>	<p>A.3</p>	<p>A.4</p>	<p>A.5</p>	<p>A.5</p>

<p>Clarity about the nature of ministry</p>	<p>B.1</p> <p>Candidates have a mature view of the nature of ministry as would be expected of the average church member.</p> <p>Candidates are able to distinguish diaconal and presbyteral roles in ordained ministry.</p> <p>Candidates have some grasp of the historic understanding of the diaconate.</p> <p>Candidates appreciate the value of different roles within the whole Body of Christ.</p> <p>Candidates are aware of potentialities and limitations of ordained ministry.</p>	<p>B.2</p> <p>Candidates are baptized, confirmed and regular Anglican communicants.</p> <p>Candidates show evidence of commitment to a regular discipline of corporate and individual prayer, worship and Bible reading.</p> <p>Candidates have an understanding of the Christian faith and a desire to deepen that understanding.</p> <p>Candidates can demonstrate personal commitment to Christ and the power of the love of God in their lives.</p>	<p>B.3</p> <p>Ordinands are able to articulate coherently Anglican understandings of the diaconate, drawing on biblical, patristic and modern texts.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate familiarity with responsibilities appropriate to the newly ordained working under supervision.</p> <p>The bishop, ministerial colleagues and potential supervisors, and representatives of the congregation(s) have clarified details of the exercise of the new ministry, and all are committed to mutual support. Management, accountability and support structures should be set up in awareness of the historic relationship between a bishop and deacons.</p>	<p>B.4</p> <p>Deacons are firmly convinced of their calling in the diaconate and are also realistic about its challenges.</p> <p>Deacons are able to articulate their own strengths and weaknesses in ministry.</p> <p>Deacons have established some form of Christian support and partnership.</p>	<p>B.1</p> <p>Spirituality and faith</p>	<p>B.2</p> <p>Candidates are baptized, confirmed and regular Anglican communicants.</p> <p>Candidates show evidence of commitment to a regular discipline of corporate and individual prayer, worship and Bible reading.</p> <p>Candidates have an understanding of the Christian faith and a desire to deepen that understanding.</p> <p>Candidates can demonstrate personal commitment to Christ and the power of the love of God in their lives.</p>	<p>B.3</p> <p>Ordinands show evidence of lives increasingly formed and sustained by trust in and dependence on the gifts and grace of God.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate commitment to loving service in the Church rooted in a sustained and growing love of God in Christ.</p> <p>Ordinands are rooted and growing in a disciplined life of prayer shaped within the demands of initial training and the expectations of public ministry. This may well be expressed by taking on a rule of life.</p> <p>Ordinands have faced and been challenged by any questions about God and Christian belief raised by the process</p>	<p>B.4</p> <p>Deacons have taken the opportunity during the years in ministry for a reassessment of their spiritual discipline.</p> <p>Deacons have explored what 'occasional' further spiritual resources are helpful in their ministerial life eg retreat, quiet days, conference etc.</p> <p>Deacons have developed ways of sharing the spiritual life of the community they have been serving.</p>	<p>B.5</p> <p>Deacons have a clear understanding, of the roles, tasks, potential and limitations of the diaconate.</p> <p>Deacons have themselves ministered in more than one context.</p> <p>Deacons are confident to talk about and assist others with their life of prayer.</p>
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<p>Personality, character and integrity</p>	<p>C.1</p>	<p>of training.</p> <p>Ordinands have developed basic skills of interpretation to make connections between their own life experience and the Christian tradition of faith.</p>	<p>C.2</p> <p>Candidates are mature and stable, able to face change and pressure in a flexible and balanced way.</p> <p>Candidates are outgoing, and not too introverted.</p> <p>Candidates are keenly aware of and responsive to 'need', both in individuals and in society as a whole.</p> <p>Candidates are people who are particularly challenged by injustice and oppression.</p>	<p>C.3</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate insight, openness, maturity and stability in the face of pressure and changing circumstances.</p> <p>Ordinands are able to reflect with insight on personal strengths and weaknesses, their gifts and their vulnerability.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate evidence of personal and spiritual growth and self-awareness.</p> <p>Ordinands exercise appropriate care of self, accountability to others and are aware of how to access support when needed.</p> <p>Ordinands are open to others and also able to keep confidences.</p> <p>Ordinands have deepened their commitment to the prophetic element to Christian discipleship and ministry, particularly by drawing upon biblical models.</p>	<p>C.4</p> <p>Deacons display insight, openness, maturity, integrity and stability in public ministry.</p> <p>Deacons continue to reflect with insight on personal strengths and weaknesses, their gifts and their vulnerability.</p> <p>Deacons exercise appropriate care of self, work-life balance and accountability to others, and can access support when needed.</p> <p>Deacons have developed a personality and character worthy of example.</p> <p>Deacons have important interests and concerns outside the church.</p>	<p>C.5</p> <p>Deacons have demonstrated their ability to work in a way that is collaborative and enables others.</p>
<p>Relationships</p>	<p>D.1</p>	<p>Candidates are able to establish good relationships with many different types of people.</p> <p>Candidates are aware of the demands of human relationships.</p> <p>Candidates has a basic understanding of the biblical patterns of and demands on</p>	<p>D.2</p>	<p>D.3</p> <p>Ordinands form and sustain good relationships, not only with those who are like-minded but also with those from whom they differ.</p> <p>Ordinands value and practise integrity, respect for others, empathy and honesty in their relationships, and learn from them.</p>	<p>D.4</p> <p>Deacons can form and sustain relationships across a wide range of people, particularly in situations of conflict and stress.</p> <p>Deacons have become role models of good practice in a wide range of pastoral and professional relationships.</p> <p>Deacons are able to draw appropriate</p>	<p>D.5</p> <p>Deacons have reflected on how groups work.</p> <p>Deacons show awareness of the importance of avoiding creating dependency in others.</p>

<p>E.1</p> <p>Leadership and collaboration</p>	<p>human relationships.</p>	<p>E.2</p> <p>Candidates are recognised as a person who has the respect both of the local congregation and within the wider community and who is both able to offer leadership and to accept the leadership of others.</p> <p>Candidates is aware of the importance of working collaboratively.</p>	<p>E.3</p> <p>Ordinands build good relationships outside the church.</p> <p>Ordinands have the ability to mobilise others to carry out diaconal ministry.</p> <p>Ordinands understand issues of sexuality, gender and power, particularly in relation to working with colleagues of the opposite sex.</p> <p>Ordinands value the importance of effective ministerial leadership, and of the role of the minister in providing an example of love and faith as a witness to the servanthood of Christ.</p> <p>Ordinands are alert to the need for different methods and styles of leadership.</p> <p>Ordinands have learned from practical engagement in working collaboratively with others in the life of the church.</p> <p>Ordinands show willingness to receive the authority of others.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate ability to recognise and mobilise the gifts of others.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate openness toward and ability to gain from the experience of still being in training.</p> <p>Ordinands have some experience of the working of groups, and the use of use to enable or disable others.</p> <p>Ordinands understand responsibility and decision-making, its implementation and follow-up.</p>	<p>E.4</p> <p>boundaries in their professional and ministerial life.</p>	<p>E.5</p>
<p>F.1</p>	<p>F.2</p>	<p>F.3</p>	<p>F.4</p> <p>Deacons demonstrate the ability to supervise others in a varied range of roles and responsibilities.</p> <p>Deacons have developed their own leadership style, appropriate to the work of diaconal ministry.</p> <p>Deacons continue to demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively and in teams and groups.</p> <p>Deacons show clear ability to recognise and nurture the gifts of others.</p>	<p>F.5</p> <p>Deacons have had experience of supervising others in ministry.</p>	<p>F.5</p>

<p>Awareness of context</p>	<p>G.1</p> <p>Candidates show sensitivity to their cultural context, and have the ability to make wise observations about the world around them.</p> <p>Candidates have some experience of seeking to meet some of the immediate needs of their community.</p> <p>Candidates have some awareness of world issues and of the differing response of the church to diverse contexts.</p>	<p>G.2</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate some understanding something of the geographical, historical, political, cultural, social (and possibly linguistic) context in which they live, and are developing the tools to make interpretive connections and theological sense of these contexts.</p> <p>Ordinands display a good understanding of the local setting of their ministry.</p> <p>Ordinands show particular awareness of the pains and stresses in their own context, and of the spiritual and ethical issues raised there.</p> <p>Ordinands are able to communicate to others an understanding of context in order to enable the Christian community to respond to it.</p>	<p>G.3</p> <p>Ordinands have successfully undertaken a course of <i>biblical and</i> theological study.</p> <p>Ordinands have a clear grasp of the major statements of faith held by Christians, especially those held by Anglicans, and an understanding of how they may have application to contemporary issues.</p> <p>Ordinands have a good overall view of the Bible and its major themes and divisions.</p> <p>Ordinands understand the importance of the community's reading of the Bible in the light of Christian tradition and God-given reason.</p> <p>Ordinands have integrated their theological learning with their practice of prayer and worship.</p>	<p>G.4</p> <p>Deacons have demonstrated the ability to effectively mobilise others to meet need and engage in advocacy in the public arena.</p> <p>Deacons are able to be both committed to and objective about their own context, and recognise the dangers of being driven by its pressures and duties.</p> <p>Deacons have experience of dealing with various social and cultural situations, and can make interpretive connections and theological sense of these contexts.</p> <p>Deacons are able to articulate issues of contextualization / inculturation of the Christian faith.</p>	<p>G.5</p> <p>Deacons can express with clarity the interpretative connections suggested in the preceding column.</p>
<p>Biblical and theological competence</p>	<p>G.2</p> <p>Candidates have the necessary intellectual capacity and quality of mind to undertake a course of theological study and preparation and to cope with the intellectual demands of ministry.</p> <p>Candidates show an understanding of the Christian faith and a desire to deepen their understanding.</p> <p>Candidates have a broad understanding of the scope of the Bible.</p> <p>Candidates understand the importance of biblical interpretation.</p> <p>Candidates have some appreciation of the value of church history, liturgy, ethics and social action.</p>	<p>G.3</p> <p>Ordinands have successfully undertaken a course of <i>biblical and</i> theological study.</p> <p>Ordinands have a clear grasp of the major statements of faith held by Christians, especially those held by Anglicans, and an understanding of how they may have application to contemporary issues.</p> <p>Ordinands have a good overall view of the Bible and its major themes and divisions.</p> <p>Ordinands understand the importance of the community's reading of the Bible in the light of Christian tradition and God-given reason.</p> <p>Ordinands have integrated their theological learning with their practice of prayer and worship.</p>	<p>G.4</p> <p>Deacons have continued to study scripture, using the Bible across a wide range of settings and have become proficient in appropriate contextualization and application of biblical teaching.</p> <p>Deacons have demonstrated an on-going desire to grow in understanding by participation in Continuing Ministerial Education / Post-Ordination Training and other means of education.</p> <p>Deacons make time for on-going learning and reflection with ordained and lay colleagues, including, where possible, others engaged in diaconal ministry.</p>	<p>G.5</p> <p>Deacons have a good grasp of biblical and theological knowledge.</p>	

<p>Practical competence</p>	<p>H.1</p>	<p>Ordinands are aware of the need for continuing theological study throughout their ministry.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate some understanding of the ways in which Christian beliefs and practices have developed over time and are developing in varying contexts.</p> <p>As reflective practitioners, ordinands are able to engage thoughtfully and critically with a wide range of people in order to communicate the gospel and encourage others to learn and explore.</p> <p>Ordinands have reflected on the history, theology and contemporary understandings of the diaconate, particularly as it is understood within Anglicanism.</p>	<p>H.2</p>	<p>H.3</p>	<p>H.4</p>	<p>H.5</p>
<p>Candidates show awareness of the need for training in the practical aspects of</p>	<p>Candidates show some familiarity with parochial, diocesan and provincial / national church structures.</p> <p>Candidates have gifts for and a desire to proclaim the word, communicate the gospel and teach the faith.</p> <p>Candidates have a general appreciation of the liturgical tradition, and the roles that deacons may play in the liturgy.</p> <p>Candidates show the potential to exercise the practical aspects of specifically diaconal ministry.</p> <p>Candidates have some experience of basic administration or are willing to learn.</p>	<p>Ordinands have had experience in and are competent to exercise the specific liturgical roles that are linked to diaconal ministry in their context.</p> <p>Ordinands have had experience of a range of pastoral situations, show that they have learned by dealing with these and can demonstrate the capacity to be a provider of pastoral care.</p> <p>Ordinands demonstrate an awareness and some experience of the church's role and opportunities in public life, and in collaborative and well-informed working with ecumenical partners, other faith communities and secular agencies.</p> <p>Ordinands can demonstrate communication skills appropriate to the</p>	<p>Deacons be competent and at ease about exercising the specific liturgical, teaching and pastoral roles that are linked to diaconal ministry.</p> <p>Deacons have undertaken training for any additional roles that may be delegated to them after a number of years in ministry.</p>	<p>Deacons have had basic training in counselling and adult education skills.</p> <p>Deacons have had considerable experience of a teaching role within the local church setting.</p> <p>Deacons are recognised in the community as being proficient practitioners of the diaconal ministry.</p>		

<p>Mission and evangelism</p>	<p>I.1</p>	<p>context. Ordinands show understanding of how adults and children learn in order to nurture others in faith development. Ordinands understand basic administration including stewardship of resources, vision, prioritisation, collaborative working, finance and accountability.</p>	<p>I.3</p>	<p>I.4</p>	<p>I.5</p>
<p>The Anglican Way</p>	<p>J.1</p>	<p>ministerial formation. Candidates be excited about the loving and saving purpose of God for the world and have a firm desire to share this by word and deed. Candidates recognise the missional aspect of diaconal ministry. Candidates understand the key issues and opportunities for Christian mission within the contemporary culture.</p>	<p>J.2</p>	<p>J.3</p>	<p>J.4</p>
		<p>Ordinands demonstrate an infectious enthusiasm for God's mission in every aspect of contemporary life. Ordinands have had practical experience of participating in mission in ways appropriate to the local situation, including the call to Christian commitment, baptism and discipleship, and to ways of service, mercy, justice and peace. Ordinands can explain with clarity the missional character of the diaconal role.</p>	<p>J.3</p>	<p>J.4</p>	<p>J.5</p>
		<p>Ordinands can demonstrate a genuine commitment to the Christian faith as lived through the Anglican Communion. Ordinands demonstrate a healthy, loyal and not-uncritical relationship to their diocese and national church / province. Ordinands have an understanding of the Anglican Communion worldwide, its history, diversity, successes, failings and contemporary challenges. Ordinands are willing to use their gifts in the service of the church beyond the local context.</p>	<p>J.3</p>	<p>J.4</p>	<p>J.5</p>
		<p>Candidates show some awareness of the ethos of Anglicanism. Candidates are committed to the worship, mission and ministry of the local church (not uncritically). Candidates show awareness of how the diaconate is understood, practically and liturgically, within (their local expression of) Anglicanism.</p>	<p>J.2</p>	<p>J.3</p>	<p>J.4</p>
		<p>Ordinands demonstrate an infectious enthusiasm for God's mission in every aspect of contemporary life. Ordinands have had practical experience of participating in mission in ways appropriate to the local situation, including the call to Christian commitment, baptism and discipleship, and to ways of service, mercy, justice and peace. Ordinands can explain with clarity the missional character of the diaconal role.</p>	<p>J.3</p>	<p>J.4</p>	<p>J.5</p>
		<p>Ordinands can demonstrate a genuine commitment to the Christian faith as lived through the Anglican Communion. Ordinands demonstrate a healthy, loyal and not-uncritical relationship to their diocese and national church / province. Ordinands have an understanding of the Anglican Communion worldwide, its history, diversity, successes, failings and contemporary challenges. Ordinands are willing to use their gifts in the service of the church beyond the local context.</p>	<p>J.3</p>	<p>J.4</p>	<p>J.5</p>

<p>Spouse</p>	K.1	<p>Candidates has fully discussed with spouse (and family as appropriate) the consequences and demands of possible selection, training, ordination and ministry.</p>	<p>Ordinands have a good grasp of Anglican theology of ministry, and a good basic grounding in Anglican doctrine, theology, liturgy, history, ethics, pastoral care and method.</p> <p>Ordinands have some understanding of Anglican spirituality, and the importance for Anglicans of the interface between liturgy and doctrinal and ethical issues.</p>	<p>Ordinands are supported by their spouse to move into the new stage of their ministry.</p> <p>Ordinands have a reasonable and worked out plan for a balanced and well-integrated family life and ordained ministry.</p>	<p>Families are asked how the ministry has impacted on them and attention is given to any problems which are identified.</p>	<p>Deacons have engaged in considered reflection on the role of a spouse in ministry.</p>
L.1	K.2	L.2	K.3	K.4	L.5	

Appendix 2

A training programme for deacons

Introduction

Issues related to the education and training of deacons are discussed in Chapter 7 and particularly on pages 69 to 71. An ongoing matter is the development of guidelines on the requirements for the diaconal candidate's theological education and practical training. ACSA will need to express its mind and on this.

Towards qualifications and a curriculum for the formation of deacons

There are two issues here that are both contentious and complex:

- *What level of qualification should be required?*

Is it a post-school qualification? In post-school education the formal qualifications at various levels on the National Qualification Framework are Higher Certificate (NQF 5), Diploma (NQF 6) and Degree (NQF 7), rising in level of academic difficulty – which may not necessarily coincide with what is needed in theological education where both knowledge and its application are inextricably interwined.

- *What should be the content of the curriculum (both theoretical and practical)?*

It is contentious in that some argue for a high level of academic achievement (such as a Diploma or Degree) and say that in interacting with people in the world, the deacon has to be a knowledgeable and articulate defender of the faith. For others a variable level is needed that can be appropriate to the context (and particularly the context of impoverished areas both rural and urban where general education levels are low). Further many would argue that the structure of state-accredited qualifications and programmes do not necessarily mesh with the learning and formational goals of the church for its ministers.

It is a complex matter, in that what deacons do is indeed very variable (see Chapter 4), and, given that the deacon is a liminal figure facing both the world and the congregation, how does prescribed training allow for particular contexts requiring specialised competencies for ministry?

Another matter is the logistics and funding of curriculum and course development – who is to be tasked with doing the curriculum development and programme planning for such qualifications or courses and who is to pay for it? This in turn must be based on the assumption that there will be a market for such courses (which in turn depends on more candidates being accepted for ordination).

Tentative recommendations

The Commission has come to the following tentative recommendations:

The level of qualifications

The preferred option is that a Diploma level be a normal requirement. This would certainly apply to younger candidates.

However, given that many people received a call to the diaconate later in life, bishops might accept an agreed programme of study based upon a Higher Certificate in lieu of this. This allows for the crafting of an appropriate study path that might encompass formal, informal and non-formal learning built around a chosen Higher Certificate without simply assuming that 'a Higher Certificate alone' is sufficient.

Currently both the College of the Transfiguration and Theological Education by Extension College offer a Diploma. TEE College also has a Higher Certificate.

If this recommendation is accepted it would become incumbent on the gatekeepers to the Fellowships of Vocation and Discernment Committees to keep it into account.

The prescribed curriculum

In general, the deacon should study what trainee presbyters should too, namely:

- Study of the Bible, theology and Church teaching, history, tradition and liturgy
- Specific instruction on *diakonia* and the diaconate
- Practical training as appropriate in:
 - » communication
 - » homiletics
 - » education (adult, youth and child)
 - » leadership and project management
 - » guidance and counselling
 - » conflict management
 - » mission and evangelism
 - » social analysis
- Engagement in spiritual development
- Basic church laws and regulations, particularly on sexual misconduct prevention training.
- Some practical training in a parish or other pastoral site for at least six months prior to ordination

Because it is often the custom for bishop to ordain older self-supporting ministers before they have finished their studies, we would recommended a minimum of 120 to 240 credits of formal study before ordination.

Some points that can be made about items in the above list:

- Candidates should gain a general overview of the Bible before focussing on details.
- There should be a heightened focus on the New Testament.
- Study of *diakonia* and the diaconate should be done even by those who will be transitional deacons as, firstly, if they are to be deacons, they need to know what they are, and, secondly, presbyters need to be able to work with distinctive deacons as their fellow ministers.

Curriculum ancillaries

There is much that deacons (and all clergy) should or could learn that is not necessarily covered in a prescribed theological college curriculum. Some of this is practical in nature, or, although important and necessary, not really at a high academic level (the set of booklets published by the Diocese of Pretoria in 1990, is a good example of this).

It is important to have courses and resources for diaconal formation. Some of these could be developed by COTT and TEEC. COTT has successfully run a semester long course on Pastoral Praxis and hopes to develop a number of short courses, some of them online. Similarly, TEEC is developing short courses.

We note that some of these could be usefully applied helping many students who have never fully graduated from TEE College to complete a qualification.

The logistics of curriculum and course development

The question arises, who is to do the curriculum and course development?

In one sense this an easy question. We have two institutions who do most of the formal theological education in ACSA, namely the College of the Transfiguration and the Theological Education by Extension College. We believe that they should be mandated, as co-operatively as possible, to develop what is needed, provided capacity and careful management is available. Given that what is developed could become part of their normal suite of deliverables, the cost implications might not be too heavy.

We note also that much training of self-supporting deacons has been done in the past by diocesan level Training for Ministry or Post-Ordination Training units. It would be good that they be consulted on what is appropriate and needed, possibly via a national conference or workshop on the diaconate. Their support would be essential for ongoing deacon formation.

