

Society for Ecumenical Studies

The Diaconate in Lutheran Traditions

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First of all let me say that there is nothing in this world which could be called the Lutheran Church. There are many different churches which call themselves Lutheran, a majority of them since 1947 belonging to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which is a rather loose church fellowship without any sort of jurisdiction over its member-churches. Some Lutheran churches are not in inter-communion with others; and one of the biggest and most expansive Lutheran churches in the world is not a member of the LWF, namely the Missouri Synod. In my presentation, I have hesitated to use the term "Lutheran" about churches but rather speak of Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions. Martin Luther himself reacted very strongly against even the use of "Lutheran" to designate his sympathisers, and Melanchthon coined the phrase "*Christianus mihi nomen est, catholicus cognomen*". But there are also historical and dogmatic reasons for distancing oneself from the use of calling a church Lutheran. I am, however, not consistent in this, I must admit.

So, what most Lutheran churches have in common is the Augsburg Confession of 1530, written by the German theologian and humanist, Philipp Melanchthon. Several Lutheran churches adhere not only to this confession but also to others. They are collected in the so-called *Book of Concorde* (or *Concordia Pia*) from 1580, which includes, in addition to the three ecumenical symbols and the Augsburg Confession, four German confessions written between 1531 and 1580. They are the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531), written by Melanchthon, the *Smalcald Articles*, written by Martin Luther (printed 1538), the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, written by Melanchthon (printed 1540), and the *Formula of Concord*, which has a long and complicated origin (*tillkomsthistoria*) but was published in 1580. To these writings are usually added the Small and Large Catechisms of Luther (published 1529). Internal Lutheran controversies as well as polemics against other 16th century reformation positions and the Roman Catholic Church accompany all these

confessional writings. So, to a greater or lesser extent, some confessional writings of German origin are marks of Lutheranism. They are stamped by historically given controversies of various kinds and cultural contexts which do not exist any more. Furthermore, their aim was not to constitute a new church. On the contrary, they convey critical norms for a given and actually existing church in Europe, the Church Catholic. Therefore they do not give any coherent description of the ordained ministry in the church, just establishing the fact that it is necessary, and that it is a ministry of word and sacrament. Therefore, tradition plays a decisive role for each Lutheran church. The fragments of ecclesiology that are to be found in the norms for Lutheranism, i.e. its confessional writings, are abstract and must be applied. Therefore, among Lutherans there is, for example, no agreement about the content and meaning of the ordained ministry, how many offices there are, or what ordination means. This is illustrated by the question of deacons.

Setting the scene

Today, the question of the diaconate is on the agenda in all churches rooted in the Lutheran-Melanchthonian reformation. One could widen the scope and state that this is the case in most Christian churches. In all discussions and investigations, proposals and decisions, one problem is central: the meaning of ordination. All other questions could be derived from that. An overview of the place of deacons in the Lutheran churches today gives a very shattered picture.

Among the Nordic folk-churches, the Church of Sweden has gradually developed the three-fold ministry of bishop, deacon and priest. The bishops stand in historical succession and are the sole persons who can convey valid ordinations to the three offices. This is nothing new in the Church of Sweden, except for deacons. They disappeared during the 1650s and returned in the form of deaconesses in the middle of the 19th century and later on as male deacons. Episcopal ordination of deacons/deaconesses became normative, however, during the 1950s and deacons as an ordained ministry became fully recognised in the ordination rite of 1987. By then the Mother House system had already been dissolved and the new canonical regulations of 2000 do not use the word deaconess.

In the Church of Norway, however, the deacons are made by an act of laying on of hands, usually but not exclusively by the bishop; but the meaning of that remains unclear. Even if the deacons are vested with a stole, as in the Church of Sweden, the interpretation of that act remains open. It is the official view of the Church of Norway

that it can be interpreted as an ordination, but need not. The same standpoint is also applied to the church's way of creating bishops. The ambiguous Norwegian word that gives room for this openness, is *vigsling*. Both deacons in the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway do mostly social work and teaching; and both have liturgical functions. In Sweden they are not prescribed in the Church ordinances but in Norway they are. In the Church of Sweden only ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist. But in Norway both deacons and licensed lay persons can preside.

So, in two neighbouring churches rooted in the Lutheran-Melanchthonian reformation, one can find one with a three-fold ministry, episcopal ordinations and ordained deacons and another one with what seems to be a three-fold ministry of deacons, bishops and priests, but in which the theological meaning of bishop and deacon remains unclear. This could be applied to almost all churches which claim to be Lutheran, namely that they have bishops, pastors (or whatever they are called) and deacons. So they have a sort of threefold ministry, ordained or not.

In North America there is a similar situation, if one compares the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). After these churches entered into church fellowship with the Anglicans and Episcopalians, respectively, they took divergent stands. In Canada the ELCC has taken on the three-fold ministry as an ordained order which includes ordination by bishops only; and deacons are fully included in that system. In the USA, however, by means of heavy compromises, the ELCA has introduced a sort of two-fold order with bishops and pastors; and the latter not necessarily ordained by bishops. They have also what is called a "diaconal ministry", which includes deaconesses according to the German tradition and deacons; and both are lay-ministries. Installation by a bishop is optional.

In Germany, Lutheranism most clearly adheres to the late medieval tradition of ordained ministry. The priesthood was the fundamental office, ordination to bishop gave some additional power and ordinations before that were transitional on the way to priesthood. The Lutheran-Melanchthonian tradition in Germany has, according to that view, seen the transitional ordinations as needless and cultivated the juridical meaning of the office of bishop.

During the 19th century, however, deaconesses and deacons were incorporated into German Lutheran church-life. The reasons for that were social unrest and

widespread poverty; and the models and motifs were given by the charitable orders in the Roman Catholic Church along with certain modes of interpretation of the New Testament concepts of *diakonia* and *diakonos*. The result became what is known as Mother House-*diakonia* and Brother House-*diakonia*. Enormous institutions were erected and thousands of brothers called deacons and sisters called deaconesses did impressive and wonderful charitable work. They were lay people, installed in their ministries by the leader of the institution to which they thereafter belonged.

Today the whole system must be revised in one way or the other. An internal secularisation or theological out-rationalisation threatens much of the social work done in the framework of the churches.

The *Kammer für Theologie* of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany has issued a proposal that deacons should be put into their office by an act equivalent to the ordination (*analog zur Ordination*) of a pastor. Deacons and pastors would then both be parts of the office in the church and the result would be *Gleichwertigkeit der beiden Ämter*. Today bishops and deacons are not ordained but installed; and the installation of deacons and deaconesses is reminiscent of the situation in ELCA. The scene is, though, complicated, because in some of the German Lutheran churches there are also deacons of a sort, who are installed but do not belong to any institution but to the regional church, *die Landeskirche*.

In any case, if the proposal of the *Theologische Kammer* passes, the similarity between the ELCA and the EKD will be that both have a sort of two-fold ministry, one with bishops and pastors, the other with pastors and deacons. But still the problem of the meaning of ordination remains. In the ELCA, bishops in apostolic succession must ordain bishops, which says more about form than content, because bishops must not necessarily ordain the presbyterate. The use of the term ordination in German Lutheranism is reserved for the presbyterate and therefore a new term seems to be needed for making deacons. That does not contribute to clarity either.

What we then arrive at is a Lutheran scene in which deacons, if they exist, are of different kinds and play different roles. In some Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions there is a three-fold ordained ministry that includes a permanent diaconate. There are examples of a three-fold ministry with a transitional diaconate (Latvia); there are examples of churches with lay diaconal ministries and lay deacons; there are examples of churches which do not have any sort of diaconate (Tanzania). There are

examples of churches in which the German 19th century Mother House diaconate still exists.¹

What in any case characterises most churches in various Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions is an ongoing discussion about the diaconate and that they have moved, all of them, at various speeds, towards a three-fold ministry. The praxis may be theologically motivated or non-theological.

There is, however, a certain convergence among the churches rooted in the Lutheran-Melanchthonian tradition interpreted by means of 19th century Protestantism, and that is that the diaconate is fundamentally charitable in function. To the deacon's job-description could be added teaching and in surprisingly many churches also liturgical tasks.

The historical development

The scattered picture I have tried to convey demands some historical background. I have hinted at the history when I depicted the present situation, but I will try to offer a more detailed historical context.

The Lutheran-Melanchthonian reformation during the 16th century was a late medieval pastoral movement, which, due to political circumstances and a growing confessionalism, developed into a schism. Church offices were consistently viewed as necessary for the church, by divine right. It is difficult to hold another position, taking into account the entire literature from the period, even if isolated polemical statements could suggest the contrary. The German Reformers generally accepted the common late medieval position that priesthood was the fundamental ministry of the church. Late medieval expositions of the seven sacraments, for example, do not mention the office of bishop. While they define the holders of the fundamental office in the church as those who are able to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Reformers define the office as an instrument for word and sacrament. But the result is the same. Basically the office of the church is one and it is local and presbyterial. To the Reformers all ordained ministries before the ordination to presbyter were transitional in character and, therefore, unnecessary; and the office of bishop was juridical in character and, according to many leading late medieval theologians, did not add

¹ For an overview, see Olson, Jeaninne E., *One Ministry Many Roles. Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries*, St. Louise MO, 1997

anything essential to the ordination to the presbyterate. That was also taken over by the Reformers, who defended the necessity of *episkope* but not ordained bishops.

In spite of the fact that the Reformers from time to time advocated the office of deacon, they never succeeded in retaining the office of deacon. Martin Luther himself regarded the diaconate with high esteem, referring to Acts 6. In 1523 he stated that deacons should not exclusively have liturgical tasks but be charitable in character. Luther also looked upon deacons as a part of the spiritual kingdom, i.e. an office of the church.² In his letter to the clergy at the diet in Augsburg in 1530, Luther states that deacons belong to what should be retained in the church.³ Some early German church ordinances tried to manifest this notion of the diaconate, but the whole thing failed, probably for two reasons. The first one is the already mentioned late medieval view of the office, which had reduced its status; and the second one had to do with the idea of the two kingdoms, according to which social care did not belong to the realm of the Gospel but to the worldly powers. Another problem was that the office of the church became defined as an instrument of word and sacrament and the reformers obviously did not succeed in bringing charitable tasks and liturgy together. In Germany the title deacon had become a title for an assistant pastor. The Lutheran-Melanchthonian confessional writings do not even mention the diaconate, either as a point of controversy or in positive writings.

But the Lutheran-Melanchthonian reformation is not one but many different reformations. In Sweden, for example, deacons were maintained but disappeared during the first part of the 17th century; and no one knows why. We lack sources for that. In the Church of Sweden, according to the Church Order of 1571, the office of bishop is regarded as instituted by the Holy Spirit, as universally accepted in the Church of Christ and as an office that must remain so to the end of the world. So at least priests and bishops were necessary offices in the church. Up to circa 1650 we know that deacons were ordained to a diaconate of a transitional character and to liturgical tasks. The Swedish bishop, Laurentius Paulinus Gothus, in his *Oratio de ministerii ecclesiastici* of 1609 holds forth that deacons belong to the "*ordinaria et perpetua ministeria*" of the church.⁴ During the 17th century and the period of so-called Lutheran Orthodoxy, Lutheran theologians in Germany and the Nordic countries also wanted to define the office of bishop as given by divine right. In the

² WA 52, 591:10ff, Rosenberg s.36f

³ WA 30, 2:250

⁴ Askmark s. 263

framework of a wide debate about whether the grades of the ordained ministry were by divine right or not, ideas about what the diaconate could be were also discussed. Another Swedish bishop, Johannes Rudbeckius, was influenced in this debate by the Anglican theologian Hadrian Saravia and his *De diversis ministerorum evangelii gradibus a Domino fuerunt instituti*, published already in 1590.⁵ It could be mentioned that these orthodox theologians did not dispute whether the diaconate in principle was a part of the hierarchy. What the majority contested was that it belonged to the *ius divinum* of the church. For us who today read these sometimes rather heavy 17th century publications, it is a little bit confusing that this discussion went on. In spite of the fact that most churches did not have deacons at all. The examples are from Sweden, but the situation was similar in Germany. The ordained ministry was looked upon as fundamentally one and as an instrument for Word and Sacraments.

This historical phase gives the first element for understanding the various views on the diaconate in modern Lutheranism. The late medieval concept of a mono-presbyterate was integrated into the Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions and made it almost impossible to retain and renew the diaconate.

If we can thus establish that various developments during the reformation and later paved the way for a basically instrumental mono-presbyterate, the next step in the historical development was the introduction of a functional view on ministry. This happened around 1800. Earlier in Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions, the ordained ministry had been interpreted as an instrument of word and sacrament and thus had no independent status in the church. An ordained minister exercised his office on the basis of his ordination. That defined his tasks. Rationalism introduced the idea of usefulness and questioned what ordained ministry was good for. The answer to that was stamped by early modernism and the consequence was a new idea of ordained ministry. The basis of this conception of ministry was praxis, namely that certain tasks had to be done. By doing certain things you became somebody. This also meant that the office of the church, at least partly, was distinguished from the word and sacrament. Skillfulness and personal capability replaced the instrumental view of office, which had been based on an ordination that conveyed grace by grace alone. The person who preached publicly and administered the sacraments became by that a pastor. According to the instrumental view, the tasks were inherent in the office.

⁵ Askmark 271

At almost the same time, pietism introduced a then long-forgotten concept of the priesthood of all baptised believers. As usual in questions of ecclesiology, pietism made common cause with rationalism and the ordained ministries very much became involved in social services, agricultural development and so on; and the question was raised whether or not laymen were able to preach and even administer the sacraments. The question of ordination was tested by the quest for efficiency and the idea of the functional ministry was taken over by pietism. In pietism, however, efficiency was partly replaced by personal faith. Ultimately only a man of faith, interpreted according to pietistic opinions, could at this time be a true preacher and minister the sacraments. This was based, especially in Germany, on the later so predominant theory of transference, which implied that each and everyone belonging to the priesthood of all baptised believers was a minister and that in principle everyone could exercise the office of the church. Only functional reasons hindered that.

Functionalism infiltrated all sorts of theologies on ordained ministry in one sense, namely by raising ideas about the possibility of various ministries in the church. Since the function that needed to be done was basic to ministry, a variety of options became possible. One that emerged was a diaconate, which actually included women, another was the ministry of missionaries. They were perceived as lay ministries, even if both missionaries and deacons/deaconesses often were inaugurated by the laying on of hands. Although some theologians, like Wilhelm Löhe in Germany and several churchmen in Sweden, preferred to have ordained deacons, this was not accepted. Instead deacons and deaconesses were looked upon as belonging to a sort of semi-clerical order, like the old minor orders in the Roman Catholic Church.

This historical phase gives the second element for understanding the various views on the diaconate in modern Lutheranism. According to functionalism, a ministry was conceived out of praxis, what had to be done in the church. Compared with the ministry of pastor, which retained parts of its instrumental character, the ministry of deacons became totally surrendered to a functional understanding of ministry: The one who did diaconal or charitable work could be called a deacon. The deacon was defined by conceptions of *diakonia*, while the pastor or priest could not, in spite of all, be exclusively defined by his work. Ordination, which was instrumental in character, prevented that.

Originally, the diaconal institutions were private and just loosely affiliated to the churches. Because of participation by the clergy in the leadership of the institutions and associations, and a growing acknowledgement by the public, deacons and deaconesses gradually became accepted as a part of official ecclesial life in Lutheranism. We have now moved into the second part of the 19th century. But the diaconate long remained in the private sphere; and in some churches that is still the case. There are two reasons for this. The first one has to do with the status of women in society. They were under certain circumstances not allowed to own property and could not vote. Deaconesses then had to be private and could not carry public offices. The other reason had to do with a revitalisation of the idea of the two kingdoms, or régimes, according to which social work belonged to the worldly régime. This late medieval theology had been of importance during the reformation period, but was thereafter forgotten except for some well defined areas of symbolic importance, such as the regulation of the power of bishops and kings in Sweden. During the social unrest in the second half of the 19th century the idea became a tool for conservative church politics, for example to hinder the integration of some new ideas from entering into the centre of the established churches. At the same time the so-called new Lutheranism stressed the importance of the ordained ministry of the church and its authority.

This historical phase gives the third element for understanding the various views on the diaconate in modern Lutheranism. Ordination must necessarily be a part of the structured, canonically regulated and thus established church. When Lutheranism could not integrate the diaconate into that public church system, it could not ordain to the diaconate.

In the development of ordained ministry in Lutheran churches, the idea of professionalism, which saw the light of day in the 19th century, plays an important role. At that time education and training became essential also for church ministries. Deacons and deaconesses were not only identified by their churchly ministry but by their professions as nurses, teachers, or social workers. Very often at the beginning of the 20th century, they were sent by their institutions and employed by parishes or institutions in wider society. During the second half of the 20th century vocations to the 19th century diaconate decreased and diaconal institutions were either secularised or closed. The result was the emergence of a still ongoing discussion and study process, which aims at finding new models for the diaconate, securing

basic ecclesiological themes expressed by the diaconate and at the same time adapting it to new cultural and social contexts.

At the same time ecumenical theological dialogues challenged the prevailing conceptions of ordained ministry in all the big Lutheran traditions. Theologians such as John Collins dispute the idea of the diaconate as a lowly, serving, charitable ministry. The 19th century interpretation of the priesthood of all baptised believers, which makes power the hermeneutical key, is questioned and refuted by most systematic theologians. The idea of ordination as a juridical act transmitting power from the congregation is replaced by an epiclectic conception of ordination in which the *epiklesis* is the bearer of its meaning.

Today changes have taken place in respect of the episcopal office and various sorts of episcopal ministry have been introduced. There seems to be no church rooted in the Lutheran-Melanchthonian reformation which has not reconsidered the diaconate, or is still in the process of changing the concept of what a deacon is.

Identifying some problems and solutions today

Let us now try to review some of the more relevant theological points which can be found in this historical panorama, and give some hints of how they are handled today.

If we try to identify the issues which today cause problems for Lutheranism, in order to reach any sort of agreement on the diaconate, it is important first to focus on the fact that Lutheranism is rooted in perceptions and categories based on late medieval controversies and theologies. That aspect was made evident by means of the scholasticism in Lutheran Orthodoxy of the 17th century. When these models of thought were confronted by early modernity in the 19th century, the dominant theologians chose to accept modernity by integrating functionalism and professionalism into the Lutheran-Melanchthonian tradition. But not just that. This thinking was developed in the context of a new invention called Protestantism, which was deductive and reductive in character. Thus the reformation became interpreted by means of ideas originating in 19th century Protestantism. One of the ideas produced was that the ordained ministry in the church derived from the priesthood of all baptised believers. Another was that the ordained ministry of the church was a function, which could be changed or reinvented, at least in principle, for the sake of the efficiency of the proclamation of the Gospel. The forms of ministry, ordained or

lay, became an open question, which had not been the case earlier in the history of Lutheranism. For the theology of the diaconate, this created freedom to take the diaconate on as a ministry in the church, even an ordained ministry.

The late-medieval mono-presbyterate had been taken over by Lutheranism. The reduction of the ordained ministry to a Eucharistic *sacerdotium* had its equivalent in the Lutheran *ministerium verbi*, the reduction, in principle, to a preaching office. If everything essential about ordained ministry earlier was more or less subsumed under the concept of priesthood, in Lutheranism it became defined by preaching and, later, teaching. The discussion today deals with the question of whether it is possible to maintain the notion of fundamentally one ordained ministry in the church and at the same time differentiate it into three or more ordained ministries. This seems to be in harmony with *koinonia* ecclesiology; and the threefold ministry corresponds to a certain extent to the description of that *koinonia* as *martyria*, *leitourgia* and *diakonia*. The introduction of the diaconate into a threefold ministry seems to be one way of getting behind the late medieval mono-presbyterate in accordance with the reformation principle of *antiquitas*, obvious, for example, in the Augsburg Confession.

This is still vivid today in some Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions, which means that this principle refers only to the *viva vox*, the actually publicly preached Word of God. Since the deacons cannot preach, because they are charitable in character - so they say in some Lutheran corners - they can not belong to the ordained ministry of the church. Other Lutheran churches hold, both in accordance with their reformation teaching and modern theories of communication, that preaching from the beginning was not a concept that denotes oral activities only, but includes a variety of communication possibilities. Therefore, the deacon could very well be integrated into the ordained ministry of the word.

Another problem in Lutheranism, affecting the view of the diaconate, is the confusion of ordinations, installations and blessings of various kinds. They are sometimes so alike that they seem to be the same thing. If one compares the content of what is called installation in one Lutheran tradition with what is called ordination in another, they seem to have the same meaning and content. If one compares two ordination rites in two different traditions, it is easy to see that they do not have the same content and meaning. During the reformation period and the time known as Lutheran

orthodoxy, ordinations of various kinds were looked upon as the conferment of power; and that power was restricted to the ministry of word and sacrament. Functionalism changed that; and the acts of installations and blessings of deacons, missionaries, teachers, pastoral assistants, church musicians and whatever, paved the way for a situation in which various churches actually have no official teaching of what they mean by some of their rites. The Church of Sweden seems to be the only church representing a Lutheran-Melanchthonian tradition which is clear on this point. It ordains bishops, priests and deacons, it sends persons into other ministries and it consecrates things. But for the moment, I find it rather difficult to discuss the ordination of deacons, since Lutheranism at large has a very confused theology of ordination.

Lastly, the reformation conception of the diaconate as charitable was changed by 19th century German theology, which focused on the concept of *Diakonie* or *diakonisch*, terms which it is not possible to translate into English. It was the need for diaconal work which shaped the diaconate, not the other way around. The result was, according to rules stated by Protestantism, that the deductive principle of *Diakonie* should be decisive for the nature and form of the diaconate. A ministry was shaped in order to get something done, according to the Protestant principle. I can see in Lutheranism a growing need for changing this perspective: first, because it is an ongoing acknowledgement of the fact that the 19th century interpretation of the biblical concept of *diakonia* in terms of tasks is not possible to defend any more. Consequently, the concept of deacon must be changed; and when, on the basis of these new insights, theologians and church leaders in Lutheran-Melanchthonian traditions discuss it, it is that *diakonia* cannot be separated from *leitourgia*. The Anglican-Lutheran International Commission document, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity* (§ 21), thus states:

"The liturgy provides the context for understanding the church's diaconal ministry. The celebration of the Eucharist ... has, in significant ways, shaped the governing structures of the church. In the Lutheran tradition, bishops (Augsburg Confession XXVIII) and ordained ministers in general (Augsburg Confession V) are defined by their connection with word and sacrament. In the Anglican tradition, bishops, priests, and deacons are ordained into ministries that have to do with word and sacrament. Both of these traditions reflect the vision and practice which comes to expression in ancient Christian

documents (e.g. the *Apology* of Justin Martyr, the *Didache*, the *Apostolic Constitution* of Hippolytos)." ⁶

And it is obvious among Lutherans that deacons, lay or not, take part in the Eucharistic liturgy to an extent previously unknown.

In the early church the deacon was not identified with, or defined by, what is charity, or even diaconal work. He or she was defined by the idea of the church as *diakonia*, which included apostolic teaching and praxis. The diaconate, therefore, had not only diaconal responsibilities but also teaching functions and included liturgical ministry. Today, therefore, in so far as the New Testament and the early church are normative, neither *diakonia* nor diaconal work should be the exclusive mark of the office of deacon. And the deacon should not be defined by the 19th century idea of an identification between charitable work and *diakonia*. The main responsibility of the deacons is "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). As one of the study processes in the framework of the World Council of Churches states:

"Again, the inseparability of worship and *diakonia* becomes most inescapably clear at the table of the Lord in the Eucharist, in which the risen, ascended Lord, gives himself to us as the *Christos diakonos*, who is concerned not only with man's spiritual need but the whole neediness of man."⁷

⁶ *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*. The Hannover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission. Published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, London 1996

⁷ *The Ministry of Deacons*, Geneva 1965 (World Council Studies No. 2)