

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

The Significance And Ministry Of The Deacon

A debate held in Church House, London on February 15 2002 at the Annual General Meeting between the Revd Dr Paul Avis, General Secretary of the Council for Christian Unity (Anglican), and the Rev Tom Bruch, General Secretary of the Lutheran Council of Great Britain, concerning developments within their respective communions on the diaconate.

A report by David Carter & Mark Woodruff

Paul Avis and Tom Bruch introduced recent Anglican and Lutheran thinking and practice concerning the diaconate.

The question is whether the deacon's role is to be seen any longer as that of the traditional ordained servant of Anglican and Catholic practice, or something more like a leading lay minister with early church precedent, which has strong parallels in modern Lutheran and Baptist models, as well as to some extent in continuing Orthodox life.

In the West, deacons were seen as servants, with all the connotations of feudal duty and social hierarchy inferred from secular society. Diaconate became separate from its roots in the local church community. It was effectively reduced to a period of preparation for priesthood, and was confined to an exclusively clerical state. With ministerial function concentrated in the priest, it lost much of its earlier scope and context among the laity.

With the Reformation in Germany, Lutherans maintained the emphasis on the ordained presbyter, and identified him as principal minister of the Gospel and dispenser of the sacraments. Even where the episcopate was preserved, the diaconate fell into abeyance.

In the 19th century, lay people came together and formed the famous Evangelical Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods and revived the diaconal ministry of lay people, recovering something of the common life of the Acts of the Apostles. In Sweden a parallel movement restored the threefold ministry, but deacons from the outset were seen as lay people commissioned to assume a deacon's ministry.

Among the Baptists the deacons are lay people who both serve and exercise leadership within the community. In other Free Churches, elders (URC) and stewards (Methodists) fulfil roles of leadership and service, in the sphere of worship, the conduct of church business and the pastoral and mission work of the community. In the Church of England too, the Church Wardens are elected not only to oversee the business of the parish, they are also admitted to office by the Bishop to assist the priest, and to provide pastoral care and lead the services in the absence of ordained clergy: a kind of diaconate. The lay readers too, like the Methodist lay preachers, provide a preaching and teaching ministry from among the laity, though the readers arguably find themselves identified as a sort of lay clergy.

In the Roman Catholic Church, ordained ministry has been opened up to married men. Even though juridically and liturgically this places them among the clerics, the fact that they continue to serve among the community to which they belonged as lay people can serve as a bridge between the priesthood and lay ministry in parishes. For the Orthodox too, while the deacon is unquestionably an ordained person, the tradition has ensured that he has not lost his place in the context of the parish community among whom he continues to live and work, as well as to serve.

The question, especially for the Church of England which has recently closely studied this area, is whether it provides best value to see the deacon as the traditional 'inferior order'. Is there now an opportunity to recover an earlier understanding of the deacon as essentially a lay person charged with a specific role or tasks, for which they are ordained with a unique commission, conferring authority, leadership and the grace to perform it?

After this survey of thinking and practice, Paul went on to refer to the recent report, *For such a time as this*, requested by the General Synod in 1999 and containing proposals for the renewal and reform of the ministry of deacons. The Report had a strong ecumenical complexion. Paul McPartlan and a Methodist deacon had served on the relevant working party. The Report had already been discussed at English ARC. Its conclusions were closely in line with current Roman Catholic thinking on the diaconate, although there were also divergences from the current Methodist pattern (a matter that would be addressed within the developing Anglican-Methodist relationship). It argued that in the Church of England deacons had a distinctive ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care. It emphasised that all Anglican priests and bishops 'carried', as it were, their diaconate into the ministries to which they were subsequently ordained.

There were currently about 75 'permanent' deacons in the Church of England, mainly in the three dioceses of London, Chichester and Portsmouth. There was concern that the tradition of a 'transitional' diaconate - i.e. preliminary to presbyteral ordination - did not do full justice to the ministry of *diakonia*.

Thinking and practice needed to take on board the seminal research of John N. Collins, who had reinterpreted the relevant ancient sources and argued that *diakonia* stood for 'responsible agency'. A deacon was someone entrusted with a responsible task. *For such a time as this* picked up this concept and linked it with the idea of the deacon as a person with a special responsibility for establishing a link between the liturgical life of the Church and its missionary presence in the community. The Report thus saw deacons neither primarily as liturgical persons nor yet as those with a mainly social-work function but as those who made the links. Anglican deacons themselves consulted for the report together preferred the term 'distinctive deacon' to 'permanent deacon', since they did not wish to preclude the possibility that any deacon might receive a subsequent call to presbyteral ministry.

There was a problem in discerning the degree of overlap between their ministry and that of others e.g. readers, pastoral assistants. Some readers had shown a degree of resentment of the way the report had handled these and, for this reason, the Synod had referred the Report back. Paul very much hoped it would be adopted.

Tom began his talk with reference to the immense diversity of practice in Lutheranism. He referred to the work of Sven-Eric Brod as the most authoritative within the contemporary Lutheran scene. He pointed to the fact that within the Lutheran confessional writings there is simply an emphasis upon the ministry of word and sacrament as essential, rather than on any norms as to a particular, and differentiated structure.

The Church of Sweden had gradually established a threefold ministry. Deacons had disappeared in it in the 1650s and reappeared under German influence in the 1850's. Episcopal ordination of deacons and deaconesses had taken place since the 1950s, with the new rite of 1987 no longer distinguishing between deacons and deaconesses. In Norway deacons, and even licensed lay people, can preside at the Eucharist. In Canada deacons are ordained; in the States they are not. In Germany the development of a diaconate followed models taken from the German Roman Catholic charitable orders and the deacons are based upon mother houses. There were still large diaconal institutions in Germany. Bishops and deacons in Germany were installed rather than being ordained. A few Lutheran churches, e.g. that of Tanzania, had no diaconate.

As a practical outcome of the 'Porvoo Communion', there is in progress a joint Anglo-Nordic study of the diaconate'. For some of the fruits of this work already garnered, see Gunnel Borgegard and Christine Hall (eds), *The Ministry of the Deacon, 1: Anglican-Lutheran Perspectives*, published by the Nordic Ecumenical Council, 1999, ISBN 9185564-10-9.