



# The Promise of the United Methodist Order of Deacon in the Twenty-First Century: Partners With the Whole People of God

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Ten years have passed since The United Methodist Church reshaped its ordering of ministry. The General Conference of 1996 established a new order called “deacon,” with a focus on connecting church and world. This ordering of ministry holds great promise for a denomination struggling

to live out its mission of extending the gracious love of God to all in the twenty-first century. Yet I find myself constantly having to advocate for and explain the order of deacon. Inside and outside the church, people seem mystified by a form of ministry that does not fit the familiar model of an ordained office. Deacons are not elders; they do not become pastors of congregations. Yet God is raising up more and more deacons, who are serving the mission of Jesus Christ with amazing creativity. God is moving in mysterious ways to call persons with a variety of God-given gifts

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and skills into the ordered ministry of The United Methodist Church. In spite of obstacles and misunderstandings, these persons will persevere and become ordained as deacons.

I truly believe the advent of the order of deacon in our church is the fruit of a Spirit-led movement. How

else does one explain the medical doctor who left his practice to establish a clinic for the uninsured? Or the young woman who organized the congregations in her city to lobby for a minimum wage for workers and succeeded? Or the woman who has discovered worship practices that enable those silenced by Alzheimer's disease to sing and pray with the language they had lost? How else does one account for the work of reconciliation in conflict-torn congregations that a deacon in Michigan has enabled? Or the commitment of a young deacon from an entitled background

walking in solidarity with hotel workers in Chicago as they negotiated for a living wage? Or the vision of a youth minister who found a way to fully include diverse youth from her community in a youth group that was primarily white and middle class? What other explanation than the Spirit's leading is there for a ministry that provides worship for homeless persons in a "camp" that is hidden from view to all but one trusted deacon? Or the college student who felt safe to explore with his deacon chaplain his emerging sexual orientation? These examples show deacons who had answered a divine call because they saw a vision for how their gifts and skills could be employed in the service of Christ through The United Methodist Church. They serve in creative and missional settings both in and beyond the church. Deacons are able to move fluidly among the diverse functions and strata of the United Methodist connection. They bring a passion that comes from a clear call to ministry, theological and societal analysis to clarify injustices that need to be addressed, and highly developed specialized skills. As the *Book of Discipline* declares, "The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced."<sup>1</sup> Deacons come out of the people of God, the *laos*, and are both empowered by and empowering of the whole. They are linked into the body of Christ.

In this paper, I argue that, despite some stresses and tensions, The United Methodist Church should embrace this new ordering of ministry. The order of deacon has the potential to revitalize the church's mission. Perhaps the issue really is this: Are we going to walk away from the world and leave it unconvinced of the reality of the gospel, or are we going to search out new models and new forms for ministry that participate in the creative grace of God? The order of deacon represents an innovative response to this searching question.

The turbulent decade since 1996 has seen shifts in world power as well as in the church. These shifts have escalated tensions, affecting both religion and politics. In many nations in the world, financial resources are stretched. The United States is deeply immersed in the conflicts of the Middle East—with significant religious consequences. Nations in the West have made security a priority, prompting their citizens to change the ways they travel and do business. Religious fundamentalism is under scrutiny everywhere, regarded with apprehension by some and viewed as promise of salvation by others. At the same time, The United Methodist Church has experienced a reduction in membership, difficult disagreements, and loss of confidence. In the midst of so much change and uncertainty, both church and state struggle to live into the new realities.

Shortly after the 1996 General Conference, Jack Seymour and I were asked to write a book that would explore the possibilities of the newly established order of deacon. *A Deacon's Heart: The New United Methodist Diaconate* appeared in 2001. In it, we said:

*Following the changes of the 1996 General Conference, the organization of the orders of ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church has become messy and ambiguous. However, out of this chaos and confusion can come vitality and creativity hitherto unknown since the earliest days of the Church. This book will argue that the ordained deacon in permanent connection created by the 1996 General Conference has the potential to redefine the ministry of the laity and reinvigorate and refocus the ministry of the elder.<sup>2</sup>*

Some of the ambiguity has cleared since we wrote these words. The services for ordination at most annual conferences have changed to reflect the differences in the orders. Most boards of ordained ministry are more hospitable to deacons and more

understanding of their distinct call. Annual conferences have instituted formation processes for probationary members that are forging relationships of support between future elders and deacons—a hopeful sign for the future. Bishops continue to appoint deacons to a variety of ministries. The category of “transitional leave” has created a safe space for deacons who are between appointments. Progress has been made in providing health and retirement benefits to deacons through the annual conference. Processes for changing orders have been defined so that elders who discern a calling to the order of deacon or deacons who sense a call to elders’ orders may do so. Each of these clarifications has advanced our understanding of the orders and of their distinctive ministries. Yet the office of deacon continues to be poorly understood. Deacons regularly hear comments like these:

- “We’re having a district pastors’ meeting. Please join us.” (Remember, deacons are clergy; but they are not pastors.)
- “Why do you need to be ordained to do that?”
- “What do you mean you can’t come baptize the lady in jail? When will you be a *real* minister?”

Many United Methodists in 1996 failed to realize that the General Conference action also affected the order of the elder. The 1996 action eliminated the “transitional deacon” as a stage toward ordination as an elder and created a second model for ordained service in the church—the deacon in full connection. Inadequate theological reflection on the magnitude of this action left the identity of both the elder and the newly formed deacon unclear.

Nevertheless, the new ordering of ministry offers exciting missional possibilities to a hurting and fractured world. The ministry of the deacon is focused on linking the church to the world in ways that can bring justice and healing in God’s love. It has the potential to focus and empower laity for

more powerful witness to the gospel. The deacon’s work is both a symbol and an instrument of the church’s mission for Jesus Christ in the world. The office of elder continues to be a sign of apostolic continuity, with a more priestly emphasis. In this way, the orders complement and reinforce each other. Thus, the church’s decision to reorder its ministries would appear to offer just what is needed for mission in these challenging times.

The United Methodist Church’s 1996 decision to reorder its ministry formed part of a larger movement to revive the diaconate for contemporary times, expressed particularly by the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran churches. Actually, *revive* is not quite accurate. The fact is, the diaconate has been strong and vital as a lay ministry for the past 150 years; but it was reserved for women. Nuns and deaconesses have connected church and world with their charity work, healing ministries, teaching, and other forms of service. Frankly, our church’s reordering of ministry is merely an expansion of the ministry to which thousands have dedicated their lives through the years—to bring hope, justice, and education through mission.

Until the mid-1950s, the office of deaconess or nun was often the only leadership option for Protestant and Catholic women. In most Western cultures, an increasingly patriarchal society had relegated women’s leadership to the sphere of the “home.” Women who were called by God to ministry had few options. They were not eligible to be ordained; that office was reserved for men. Women religious in the Roman Catholic Church were required to be cloistered and celibate. In Protestant denominations, the deaconess wore a uniform that set her apart, often lived in community, and left when she was married.

The deaconess communities were particularly strong in the late nineteenth century in Germany, England, and the United States. German deaconess

communities, largely Lutheran, established satellite missions all over the world. A Methodist, Lucy Rider Meyer, was inspired by a visit to Germany. In 1885, she founded the Chicago Training School for deaconesses (now a part of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, in Evanston, Illinois). The rigorous theological and practical curriculum of the Chicago Training School prepared women for courageous and prophetic work among urban dwellers—mostly recent immigrants or persons marginalized by poverty and lack of education. Trained in theology, medicine, and education, deaconesses were women of deep faith whose desire was to serve Christ. They were leaders who sought to participate in the reign of God by bringing justice and healing where they could. The General Conference officially recognized the office in 1888.

Deaconess communities continue on every continent to this day. At the nineteenth World Assembly of DIAKONIA, convening in Durham in the United Kingdom in 2005, meetings were conducted in German and English. These two languages were thought to be sufficient because so many of the worldwide expressions of *diakonia* are the result of the work of German and American deaconess groups stationed around the globe. However, many other languages could be heard in the groups congregating in the lobby.<sup>3</sup> The variety of ministry was remarkable. These servants of Christ are doing amazing work with the poor, oppressed, and hurting peoples of the world. In The United Methodist Church, the lay office of deaconess continues to be strong and vital, particularly in the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> The 2004 General Conference sought to end the gender-exclusive nature of the office of deaconess by adding a second office, called “home missionary,” consisting of lay men, who would serve in the same relationship to The United Methodist Church as deaconesses. Deaconesses and home

missioners answer God’s call to Christian service and are assigned through the General Board of Global Ministries.<sup>5</sup>

DIAKONIA reflects this shift to include both men and women in the ministry of *diakonia*. Although women delegates outnumbered men at the 2005 conference, a good number of men attended. These male deacons, representing the Church of England, the British Methodist Church, The United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and others, express the commitment of these denominations to embrace *diakonia* as a distinct expression of the ministry of the church. Deacons, both men and women, serve in congregations as pastoral counselors, Christian educators, musicians, and administrators. Some serve as administrators in judicatory positions. Yet other deacons serve in prison ministry, campus ministry, urban missions, community organization, and similar positions of faithful service outside the church.

Even with widespread ecumenical expression, the various versions of deacon are often misunderstood. Episcopalian deacon Ormonde Plater writes that the diaconate “tends to avoid not only a fixed definition but also a fixed place in the church.”<sup>6</sup> Conversation at these ecumenical events often reveals our common struggle to find acceptance and understanding.

The new United Methodist order of deacon is quite distinct from the office of deaconess, the probationary deacon, and the diaconal minister—the forms of diaconal ministry in existence prior to 1996. However, the new order of deacon brings The United Methodist Church in line with the ecumenical notion of a threefold ministry as defined in the documents of Churches Uniting in Christ. There we find bishops, presbyters (called “elders” in our United Methodist tradition), and deacons as three distinct expressions of the ministry of Christ. All member churches affirmed the World Council of

Churches' Faith and Order paper *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*.<sup>7</sup> *BEM* states,

*M22. Although there is no single New Testament pattern, although the Spirit has many times led the Church to adapt its ministries to contextual needs, and although other forms of the ordained ministry have been blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it. Historically, it is true to say, the threefold ministry became the generally accepted pattern in the Church of the early centuries and is still retained today by many churches. In the fulfilment of their mission and service the churches need people who in different ways express and perform the tasks of the ordained ministry in its diaconal, presbyteral and episcopal aspects and functions.*<sup>8</sup>

In paragraph M31, *BEM* defines the work of the deacon thusly: "Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life."<sup>9</sup> This ecumenical consensus clearly supports our United Methodist threefold ordering of ministry of bishops, elders, and deacons.

Yet much confusion remains around the ordering of ministry within The United Methodist Church. In current practice, local pastors, who are not ordained, are licensed for pastoral ministry and authorized to preside at the sacraments in their congregations—a clear departure from centuries of practice. At times, deacons are licensed and appointed to serve congregations as pastors—a practice that violates the distinct ministry of the deacon. Procedures to protect and support deacons seeking an appointment are unclear and uneven. When a congregation

decides to drop a deacon from its staff, too often the bishop and cabinet are unresponsive and unsupportive, even though the bishop had appointed the deacon. Individuals report instances in which deacons were not permitted to preach because that task was considered the exclusive domain of the elder, even though deacons are ordained to Word. In some cases, licensed local pastors received appointments reserved for elders. Some in The United Methodist Church still seem to think of deacons as "junior elders," unable, it appears, to relinquish the earlier understanding and practice of deacon's orders as a step toward ordination as an elder. All over the church, deacons are crying out for recognition of their authority to preside at the sacraments, especially Eucharist, as a necessary role of their ministry with the poor and marginalized. In some places, deacons are engaged in creative partnering with elders at the Communion table.<sup>10</sup> Some elders have served in extension appointments with apparently little connection or accountability to annual conferences. Deacons, on the other hand, have strict accountability and clear connections to a congregation, regardless of where they are appointed. These dissatisfactions and ambiguities are rife in The United Methodist Church, leaving many shaking their heads in dismay.

Many others, however, are not ready to give up and retreat from the new orders of ministry. Thomas E. Frank, a leading interpreter of United Methodist polity, writes, "[T]he way to work through these challenges is a blend of churchly tradition, evangelical experience, and lively pragmatism."<sup>11</sup> General Conferences (most recently in 2004) have repeatedly asked for studies on the ordering of ministry. These studies continue to raise questions about our ecclesiology, the meaning of ordination, the nature of ministry, and the embodiment of *diakonia*. Many deacons find these studies unsettling, especially when they constantly have to

explain and even justify the existence of the order. In addition, many deacons find that they need to teach their district superintendents about the structures of accountability appropriate to the order of deacon. The continuing lack of basic understanding of the order of deacon and the continual call for denominational studies of ministry leave some deacons uncertain of their future.

Nevertheless, persons are discerning a call to the order of deacon, working their way through the candidacy process, completing their theological education, and accepting ordination at the hands of a bishop. In serving appointments across the church as ordained, set-apart clergy in ministries accountable to the church, deacons are blending “churchly tradition” with the energy and passion that come from “evangelical experience,” while serving the causes of Jesus Christ with a “lively pragmatism” as guide. The theological issues raised by the various studies of ministry continue to challenge the ministry of deacons even as these deacons continue to shape the new order. Below, I address these issues, following a look at the historical roots of the ordering of ministry.

## **A Brief History of the Diaconate**

A concise look at the history of the diaconate sheds important light on the current situation. New Testament texts use the word *diakonia* many times. English translations usually render *diakonia* as “ministry” or “service.” In an effort to clarify the meaning of the term, biblical scholars have devoted considerable study to these texts in recent years.<sup>12</sup> Their work reveals meanings to *diakonia* such as “messenger,” or “one who acts as agent for another,” or “one who serves another in a household.” In Luke 22:27 Jesus says, “I am among you as one who serves (*diakoneō*).” Biblical scholar Osvaldo Vena writes, “Jesus, even though he never gave instructions for the establishment of such an office, characterized himself as one who does the work of a *diakonos*.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the ministry of *diakonia* is central to the identity of Jesus and the diaconal ministry of his first disciples.

After the death of Jesus, the disciples gathered together to keep the vision alive. James Barnett argues that the early Christian community made little distinction between clergy and laity. All Christians were called to the ministry and way of Christ, and formal offices and hierarchies were not yet established. He writes, “The Church’s organic nature and unity are but the reflection of God. God is within himself a community of persons who are united with one another in perfect harmony and oneness, yet each person of the Trinity individually possesses personality and function.”<sup>14</sup> This theological understanding of the organic unity of all who serve Christ finds echoes in the stress on the unity of ministry in the *Book of Discipline*: “All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment. . . . No ministry is subservient to another.”<sup>15</sup>

Similar concepts are found in Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12. However, the early church apparently struggled to live out the organic vision of these texts. The fact that the New Testament reiterates this egalitarian vision numerous times leads one to believe that the early Christians struggled to maintain this lofty ideal. Jesus gave few instructions that would help in the organization of a religious institution—and the earliest Christians attempted to follow after the example of Jesus. Consequently, they were not concerned with establishing impressive cathedrals and huge endowments. Their vision was the servant ministry—the *diakonia*—of all Christians in organic unity.

However, over the course of the centuries, as the church evolved, the power of the diaconate waxed and waned. At the end of the first century C.E.,

deacons shared power with bishops and functioned as a ruling council in some churches.<sup>16</sup> In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses “all the saints” in that city as well as the “bishops and deacons.” This lumping together of bishops and deacons appears often in early Christian writings. First Timothy 3:8-13 contains the most information about the early deacon. While not clarifying the functions of bishops or deacons, the passage does list the virtues each should have—the chief difference being that deacons should serve the poor and the sick. Writings in the first few centuries attest to the involvement of deacons in liturgical, pastoral, and charitable works.

By the fourth century, the office of deacon was well established. Barnett notes, “The deacon entered the fourth century as a person of considerable importance and prestige in the Church. . . . [F]requently a deacon was elected bishop. Deacons served not only as executive assistants of the bishops but represented them on occasion at councils.”<sup>17</sup> Barnett sees the Council of Nicaea as the turning point. From this time on, the diaconate began to shift from being an office unto itself that focused on bringing the church’s ministry to those on the margins of society to being an office that served as a temporary transition for those seeking to become presbyters.<sup>18</sup> From an office with a clear place in the leadership of the church, the deacon metamorphosed into a mere pause on the way to presbyter status.

Looking to history provides us with several understandings of how to construe the office of the deacon. Perhaps none of them adequately addresses the fundamental issue of how to be faithful to the ministry of *diakonia* Jesus embodied and to which he called his followers. Who will lead the church in its diaconal ministry?

United Methodists often look to John and Charles Wesley for guidance on the way we ought to go; but with regard to the diaconate, they offer little

direct help. Indirectly, though, Wesley’s commitment to the poor and to the Kin[g]dom of God expresses values that *diakonia* represents to the church today. Indeed, the commandment to love God and neighbor is still our highest calling as Christians, as we call and educate disciples for Jesus. How do we organize the church so that all Christians may live out the Great Commandment? How do we address the command to love our neighbor in our twenty-first-century world? Keeping in mind the lessons and traditions of history but not limiting ourselves to them, what offices and what organization does The United Methodist Church need as it seeks to be faithful to the Great Commandment in the new century?

## **The Deacon in The United Methodist Church**

The new order of deacon, as a distinct form of ordained ministry, represents a powerful vehicle for responding to these questions. Unimpaired by the sexism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the diaconate is now an option for persons who wish to serve The United Methodist Church in an ordained relationship different from the traditional priestly role of the elder. Loving neighbor becomes ever more complicated in the violent, multicultural, and multireligious world of the twenty-first century. Addressing the injustices and wounds of the world in love requires many skills. The diaconate, with its stress on linking the church to the needs of the world, can provide important leadership to the church.

In *A Deacon’s Heart*, Jack Seymour and I used the image of the eucharistic table to clarify the distinctive focus for *diakonia*. The deacon’s work is to extend Christ’s table of new life, hope, and grace to all. Eucharist is

- *an act of remembering and celebrating . . . union with Christ,*

- *an act of building up and sustaining the community, the Body of Christ,*
- *an act of promise in which the Church and God's glorious future [are] connected.*<sup>19</sup>

God invites all to the Great Banquet. *Diakonia* extends the eucharistic table in partnership with the divine initiative and the whole people of God.

The *Book of Discipline* states: “Those who respond to God’s call to lead in service and to equip others for this ministry through teaching, proclamation, and worship and who assist elders in the administration of the sacraments are ordained deacons.”<sup>20</sup> Let us unpack the central claims of this statement. First, a deacon is called by God. In our United Methodist system, the deacon’s personal experience of God’s call must be validated first by a congregation and then through the structures of the annual conference. As such, the individual’s call is authorized. United Methodists place special emphasis on a personal experience of call, because we regard experience as a legitimate avenue of God’s grace. However, the individual’s experience needs the balance of the community’s discernment of God’s leading. Therefore, in validating the individual’s sense of call, the church looks for specific gifts, or *charisms*, in the person’s life as indications of the Spirit’s empowerment for ministry. Second, deacons are to “lead in service.” This means that the deacon not only *engages* in ministries of service but also *leads* the church in its service in the world. Third, deacons “equip others for this ministry” as they lead the *laos* in their ministry in the world. The *Discipline* then names three specific gifts deacons may employ in their work of equipping the church for ministry: teaching, proclamation, and worship, along with assisting the elders in the administration of the sacraments. Deacons are ordained to Word and Service, a reflection of the twin emphases on leading in service and equipping others to serve.

Currently, ordained deacons serve in every annual conference in the United States. Nearly 1,300 are now ordained and almost 2,000 are in the candidacy process. Many serve in local churches; others reach to the ends of the earth in mission. Increasing numbers are preparing for ministries in creative justice outside the church and others are preparing for ministries calling the people of God to service through the church.

Ten years have passed since the first ordination of these new deacons in 1997. Unfortunately, many people in The United Methodist Church are still woefully ignorant about the role and function of the new deacon. People continue to resist the new office by claiming they do not understand it. After ten years, why is there still so much resistance toward the new order of deacon in the church? I suspect the answer has much to do with tensions and confusions around ecclesiology, mission, ordination, and ministry in our church. Thus, gaining clarity on these theological matters will go a long way in addressing the current resistance to the new deacon’s order as well as help us to identify the exciting possibilities this new ordering of ministry presents. Let us begin, then, with a brief look at our understanding of the nature of the church, mission, ordination, and ministry.

## **What Is the Church?**

Many scholars agree that United Methodists are unclear about the nature of the church. On the one hand, The United Methodist Church’s commitment to the apostolic ministry finds expression in its doctrinal affirmations, structures of accountability for set-apart ministry, ecumenical relationships, and more.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, United Methodists see themselves as a movement radically open to fresh winds of the Spirit—a posture that tends to spawn often-unpredictable, ever-new ministries of discipleship, hope, and justice. These two images of the church—being a *church* and being a *move-*

*ment*—have stood in tension in Methodism from the beginning; and, as we shall see, understanding this reality does much to illuminate the current confusion around the ministry of the deacon.

John Wesley himself experienced this tension as he guided the early Methodist movement in the Church of England. (Living with tension is not new to United Methodists!) He was clear, as was the Church of England of his day, that the sacraments were the prerogative of the church, with its orderly apostolic succession, its priestly office, and its place in every village. At the same time, he helped organize a movement that went well beyond the established church and that offered spiritual food to a hungry culture. Leaders were expected to demonstrate a call, affirmed by the Spirit; a willingness to submit to the discipline of class meetings and other accountability structures; and gifts for teaching and preaching that produced fruits. In the Church of England, an educated clergy remained the rule of the day with only bishops qualified to ordain, following clearly established ecclesial processes. In America, however, the Methodist movement faced the challenge of a frontier with little or no official church presence and thus a great need for sacramental ministry. Honoring their apostolic heritage, which includes the historic link between ordination and sacramental administration, American Methodists early on began ordaining the Spirit-called men (and later a few exceptional women evangelists) whom they sent out to preach the gospel so that these leaders could offer the sacraments to persons across the land. Thus, The United Methodist Church is heir to both the order of the traditional church and the innovation of a movement of spiritual awakening.

The tension inherent in Methodist perception between being a church and being a renewal movement remains with United Methodists today.

Thus, some argue that we must continue to follow the pattern set by Wesley and Asbury: Ordination is reserved for those who itinerate and are authorized for Word, Sacrament, and Order. Others, I among them, argue that a new day calls for new structures—patterns of ministry better suited to the church's mission in the twenty-first century.

The new order of deacon presents several challenges to the patterns of ordained ministry in place prior to 1996. First, unlike elders, deacons do not itinerate. Elders pledge to serve wherever the bishop and cabinet send them. Deacons must find their own employment and then seek the bishop's approval. Both are appointed, but the term means something different in each case. Sometimes, some elders appear jealous of the deacon's freedom to seek out a place to serve. However, these colleagues do not fully realize the obstacles that deacons face in initiating their own employment. Deacons struggle to be faithful to God's call on their lives while seeking to earn enough to make a living. Complicating matters still further is the need to find a place of service to which the bishop will appoint a deacon! On the other hand, at times some deacons appear jealous of the security provided by an itinerant system that provides an appointment with at least a guaranteed minimum salary, housing, health insurance, and pension benefits. For all intents and purposes, then, in the new configuration, the deacon operates in a "call" system, with close oversight from the bishop, while the elder operates in an "itinerancy" system, with security but little autonomy. The new order of deacon is clearly an innovation from the pattern set up by John Wesley and Francis Asbury so long ago—and the resulting ambiguity creates challenges for both elders and deacons.

A second challenge of the new diaconate to our church's pattern of ministry is that the qualifications for becoming a deacon are different

from those for elders (both of which are different still from qualifications for becoming a local pastor). This difference is of particular concern at a time when many people in The United Methodist Church are anxious about the quality of clergy leadership. Boards of ordained ministry struggle to discern the appropriate entrance standards into ordained ministry for both deacons and elders. Part of the reason for this struggle is that as membership declines, ineffective clergy become liabilities the denomination can no longer afford.

We all agree that the church should not ordain anyone who does not hold to high standards of morality, ethics, and personal and professional behavior. We also know that the times call for persons with highly developed theological and leadership skills. Yet cabinets spend hours every year trying to find places of service for ineffective clergy. In response, in examining candidates for ordination, boards of ordained ministry struggle to recommend only those who meet the highest standards.

The educational standard for elders is the Master of Divinity degree. Deacons sometimes have different credentials. Some have M.Div. degrees, but many others have master's degrees in other fields of study (which prepare them for and enhance their service) as well as theological education obtained by fulfilling the basic graduate theological studies requirement in the *Book of Discipline*.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, deacons' academic preparation may include professional ministry certification (for example, in Christian Education or Spiritual Formation) and completion of the basic graduate theological studies. Boards of ordained ministry continue to struggle to interpret the standards for academic preparation required for a deacon who wishes to be appointed to serve in the world as, say, a lawyer or a union organizer.

Should such persons be expected to be competent preachers? Is it appropriate to expect an aspiring deacon to turn in a video recording of a sermon? Or would it be more appropriate to ask for evidence of competency in his or her specialized ministry? What should the board do in the case of a deacon candidate who is a licensed therapist where issues of confidentiality may preclude recording a counseling session? Recall Thomas Frank's advice that addressing such issues calls for "a blend of churchly tradition, evangelical experience, and lively pragmatism."<sup>23</sup> Boards of ordained ministry, as they interview candidates, will clarify and spell out how academic preparation, call, and missional leadership skills interact to qualify a person for the ministry of the deacon. Deacons expect and value high standards. But qualifications for effective deacons differ somewhat from those for effective elders.

I now return to the question, "What is the church?" Our concepts of ecclesiology shape our understandings of what it means to authorize, ordain, and validate persons for ministry. The church is an institution with responsibility for ordering the processes of Christian formation and for administering the sacraments. The church authorizes and delegates authority for this work to those who have been called, prepared, examined, and ordained to Word, Service, Sacrament, and Order. Elders teach the laity and prepare them for Christian vocation. Worship and teaching are primary tasks of the church. Clearly, this priestly role belongs to the essence—the *raison d'être*—of the church. But Christian formation means little unless it results in the fulfillment of the reign of God. This emphasis on the diaconal role in the world is also central to our tradition. Therefore, to lead this work amid the multiple contexts of our twenty-first-century world, the church urgently needs a cadre of called, prepared, examined,

ordained, and authorized persons focused on equipping and empowering disciples for the transformation of the world. Deacons are called by God to serve in creative and missional settings both in and beyond the church, leading in *diakonia*. Herein lies the promise of the renewed deacon.

This promise can best be realized when we clarify our understandings of the nature of the church. The United Methodist Church, alongside other Christian denominations, honors its tradition and its systems of accountability, which include careful examination and authorizing of those who will guide her work. Yet The United Methodist Church, along with all other Christians, must also look to the organic model of a servant ministry, captured in Paul's metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, in which we are "members one of another" (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Most scholars are clear that the early church exhibited this organic model. The offices of deacon and elder participate in both aspects of the church. The elder who attends to order, sacrament, and preaching the Word is bound by the apostolic task. Yet elders are also bound together through the connection in an organic unity that seeks the vitality of all and joins in diaconal ministry for the world. Likewise, the deacon is connected to the elder's calling to ordering the life of the congregation through Word and Sacrament. For instance, the deacon contributes to the work of ordering as he or she organizes the Sunday school, and participates in the priestly task in preparing a choir to lead in worship. In the congregation's efforts to organize teams to lobby for a living wage for city workers or to visit hospitals and prisons to offer the gospel, the deacon joins in the organic body that seeks to respond to the Spirit's leading. The apostolic and organic ways of being are part of The United Methodist Church today, and both contribute to its vitality. Both

deacons and elders are heir to the apostolic tradition *and* part of the organic unity of the interdependent body of Christ.

Both organic and apostolic models of church are articulated in the *Discipline*: "The heart of Christian ministry is Christ's ministry of outreaching love." Paragraph 129 elaborates on the organic nature of the church's life:

*The Unity of Ministry in Christ—There is but one ministry in Christ, but there are diverse gifts and evidences of God's grace in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:4-16). The ministry of all Christians is complementary. No ministry is subservient to another. All United Methodists are summoned and sent by Christ to live and work together in mutual interdependence and to be guided by the Spirit into the truth that frees and the love that reconciles.*<sup>24</sup>

The notion of "mutual interdependence" stands in stark contrast to the culture in which The United Methodist Church finds itself in the United States. At times, our church seems to lose sight of itself as a place where diverse gifts are honored and ends up reflecting the secular value of winners and losers. Bitter and hostile struggles at General Conference, where narrow majorities prevail and minority opinions are attacked and dishonored, are antithetical to the organic notion that honors diversity.

However, mutual interdependence is exactly the image I want to suggest for the complementary ministries of deacon, elder, and laity. When the church looks to a variety of paradigms, persons, gifts, models, and offices for its leadership, and each seeks to support the other, we can learn new ways and seize new opportunities for diaconal ministry that transforms the world.

Undermining this vision of interdependence is the endless dialogue about rights, supervision, and

accountability. We spend a great deal more energy and generate far more “heat than light,” as Bishop W.T. Handy used to say, on these discussions than we give to building up one another and to learning to share power. United Methodists have been infected by the values of the secular culture, and we seem at a loss about how to rid ourselves of this malady. Nevertheless, we have a vision of how the church *should* be, expressed eloquently in ¶129 of the *Discipline*.

The section on the local church in the *Discipline* contains further expressions of our ecclesiology:

*The local church provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. It is a community of true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment.*<sup>25</sup>

The phrase “community of true believers” shows that the church is the people of God, seeking to follow Christ. The *Discipline* speaks powerfully to this idea:

*The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion of this responsibility; the church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world.*<sup>26</sup>

This understanding of ecclesiology emphasizes the believing people in community and their enacting of the Good News. All Christians are called to ministry, a claim put on our lives in our baptism.<sup>27</sup>

However, if the church is both a living, organic *movement* that can adapt to its environment *and* an ordered, tradition-rich *institution*, then perhaps the

1996 reordering of ministry was a bold realization, led by the Holy Spirit. Deacons tend to be Spirit-led folks with creative approaches to ministry. Medical doctors have experienced a call and have left lucrative practices to accept an appointment to begin clinics for the working poor. Educators have provided contexts for theological reflection that empower laity to witness for justice in their communities. Young, idealistic men and women have carved out positions where they serve as advocates for the poor and disenfranchised as union organizers, under the supervision of the bishop. Deacons experience a call to ministry in particular settings and for particular needs in the world and thereby extend the mission of the church into those places. Elders, through the Master of Divinity degree, receive excellent preparation for knowing the Christian tradition, preaching and teaching the Word, and keeping The United Methodist Church in order as it organizes for mission.

It is inevitable that these two ways of being in ministry, placed on equal footing through ordination and full conference membership, will be in tension. However, this tension can provide the stability and resistance needed to stimulate growth and new practices. The vast missional challenges of the new century call for new practices and our blending of “churchly tradition, evangelical experience, and lively pragmatism” is particularly suited to responding to these emerging needs.

## **The Mission of the Church**

To respond robustly to these missional challenges, The United Methodist Church must take stock of its twenty-first-century context. Where does The United Methodist Church find itself today? Western cultures are becoming increasingly secular. The church can no longer rely on government and public schools to support its values and form the faith of its members. Where once public schools used the Bible to teach

children to read and American public institutions freely drew on Christian teachings to formulate their mission statements, now our emerging multireligious world requires a secular, perhaps even a multireligious, public dialogue. As part of this dialogue, the church must challenge the world and the easy ways we accept compromises, violence, pain, poverty, and brokenness as “necessary” realities of the day.

In this secular cultural milieu in the United States, the primary task of the Christian church, and the church alone, is to form disciples of Jesus Christ, making Christian formation foremost in the church’s mission. Only the church can be relied upon to teach and form persons in the way of Christ. We Christian educators used to say, “The church is always only one generation away from extinction.” This saying seems truer today than it did twenty-five years ago, when I began serving as a Christian educator. Without continual teaching, nurture, and procreation, the church will die out. We cannot take the church for granted. Its primary mission must be to form Christians.

This formation must occur in a church that stands in opposition to the culture as an organic, embodied, Spirit-led, and mission-oriented institution. Where Western culture is individualistic, hierarchical, and competitive, the church can be communal, sharing resources and power and resisting oppression. As I argued earlier, Scripture offers rich images of the organic nature of our life together as followers of Christ. A major thrust of the mission of The United Methodist Church in the twenty-first century is for the church to reflect God’s communal nature and connection to all creation. The ecology of the church should support and protect life and the growth of the diversity of God’s creativity. Technology and other products of Western culture should be used in ways that promote justice and healing and should include a diverse range of opportunities for growth and thought.

The mission of The United Methodist Church in the twenty-first century is captured in the Great Commandment: Love God and love neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39). We love God in worship and the sacraments. We also love God in our loving acts to our neighbor. This is what making disciples for Jesus Christ means. The eucharistic table models the union of loving God and loving neighbor as we join in Holy Communion and go forth from there to extend the table of grace into the world. With the world experiencing chaos, violence, and death, the Great Banquet seems a more and more elusive goal.

Precisely because of the current state of the world, the church must reach out more assertively than ever. The people of God cannot trust the culture to act in loving and just ways. We must enter the public dialogue, joining our voices with those of leaders in other religions. We must intervene on behalf of those who have no power or no voice in the public dialogue and advocate for and create change in a culture that is too quick to cast aside those whom it considers weak or inarticulate or simply “different.” We must offer spiritual food to persons who are starved for it. Tasks like these, working to bring about God’s reign, where “justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24), belong to the church’s fundamental calling in our day. Deacons, who are out on the creative edge, living out a Spirit-led identity, can help to lead The United Methodist Church in its mission to love God and neighbor.

### **What Is *Diakonia*?**

As previously mentioned, in the New Testament and other early church writings the word *diakonia* means “service” or “ministry.” According to scholars, the Greeks used the term to refer to one who waits on tables and sometimes to a servant in a more general sense. Jesus says, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). As followers of Jesus, we too seek not to be

served but to serve. Taking liberties with the text, we might have it read, “I came not to be deaconed but to deacon.” John Collins adds an additional dimension in his important book *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*, when he asserts that *diakonia* also implicitly carries the further meanings of “messenger” or “preacher,” thus adding the dimension of Word to the deacon’s calling.<sup>28</sup>

As the Christian movement emerged, communities of faith cared for one another in ways strikingly different from those of the surrounding cultures. Some evidence exists that early churches even bought slaves out of slavery.<sup>29</sup> The ministry of Jesus called the church to new ways of living and serving—ways that eventually were embodied in the role of deacon.

The crucial question for us at the outset of the twenty-first century is this: What should *diakonia* mean *now*? *Diakonia* is the work of the people of God, the *laos*, serving Christ and bringing good news to a groaning creation. It is not the exclusive domain of any office but is the work of all disciples. Deacons lead in equipping disciples for service in the church and in the world. In ordering ourselves for this mission, I envision a church in which deacons move fluidly among its diverse functions and strata, with strong faith, developed practices in theological analysis, skills in working for healing, justice, and reconciliation, and a willingness to be accountable to The United Methodist Church.

Our ecclesiology, with its itinerant clergy (elders) alongside its called-appointed clergy (deacons), is poised to respond in different ways to different needs. A person whose fundamental calling is priestly—the elder—will always be restless and dissatisfied until he or she has a flock to pastor. A person whose fundamental calling is diaconal—the deacon—will always be restless until he or she has a prophetic edge to his or her ministry, one foot in the world, seeking the reign of God. The call, relationship, and identity of these two leaders are

different; these leaders cannot be forced into one mold. Yet we need persons who can serve as leaders to the whole church. If our ecclesiology affirms our inheritance of the apostolic tradition, then we need to keep order in the church. If we are also a movement ever responsive to fresh promptings of the Spirit, then we need leaders for our discipleship in church and world. Sometimes these conceptualizations will come into conflict. We should not fear such conflict. Conflict can be clarifying as we seek to articulate why we do what we do. Tensions can energize.

Frank’s method of churchly tradition, evangelical experience, and lively pragmatism is useful in adjudicating such tensions. When the 1996 General Conference established the order of deacon, it built primarily upon the “churchly tradition” of the work of the deaconesses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the office of diaconal ministers in place between 1976 and 1996. Deaconesses were young women who found a way to serve in creative and often courageous ways outside the accepted bounds of the patriarchal culture by wearing distinctive garb, living in community, and remaining single. Their training was remarkably similar to the curriculum required for the Master of Divinity, the norm for ordination to elders’ orders in The United Methodist Church now. But it was parallel and separate as well as self-regulating.

The “lively pragmatism” of deaconesses allowed them to serve in creative tension with the constraints of culture and the ecclesiastical institution. In the emerging urban society of their day, immigrant communities were desperately in need of education, healthcare, and Christian formation. The deaconesses were well educated and trained to extend Christ’s love to their neighbors, finding themselves at the forefront of the church’s mission in those communities. They found an acceptable way to serve as persons authorized by the

church; their faith and evangelical experience empowered them; and a lively pragmatism gave them a way around the obstacles provided by patriarchy and society. They served as they could.

In 1976, fresh from the 1968 merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church to form The United Methodist Church, despite its optimism, the new denomination also was smarting from the wounds of racial segregation and slow progress toward integration. In the midst of this tumult, the General Conference approved a new office of diaconal minister, consecrated to a lifetime of ministry. The key foci for this office were love, service, and justice. Both men and women could become diaconal ministers, upon consecration by the bishop. Diaconal ministers adopted the alb as their liturgical garb to express their distinctive work. Although clearly a lay office, diaconal ministry experienced some of the same tensions elders and deacons struggle with today. The diaconal minister did not itinerate but needed the bishop's approval for an appointment. Seminary education was required. The conference board of diaconal ministry examined candidates, using a process parallel to that for persons seeking ordination as probationary deacons or elders. Thus, already in 1976 the church put a "call" system in place alongside an "itinerant" system. This configuration of orders of ministry clearly created one group that was second-class, namely, the diaconal minister. Many people referred to diaconal ministers as neither fish nor fowl.

Diaconal ministers clearly were set apart: As persons consecrated for a lifetime of ministry, they no longer were in the same relationship to the church as a layperson. Yet, as laypersons, they were not clergy. Where did they fit? Nevertheless, lively pragmatism aided the new diaconal ministers as they struggled to find a place. Many found allies and partners among the laity of the annual

conference and were elected as delegates to General Conference. Yet, in terms of their identity, many diaconal ministers felt greater kinship with clergy than with laypeople. Pressure began to build to make *diakonia* a full partner in the clergy leadership of the church. The ambiguities surrounding the identity of the diaconal minister and the possibilities for trained, tested, and ordained diaconal leadership contributing to the mission of The United Methodist Church led to the establishment of the Order of Deacons in 1996. Thus we have the deacon—leading and equipping the church in servant ministry.

### **What Does Ordination Mean?**

James Barnett relates a story that powerfully illustrates the crux of this question. The setting is a eucharistic celebration where a priest was part of the congregation. As the people came forward to receive the elements, the priest was among them. However, when it was the priest's turn to receive the bread, the presider was unsure about what to do. Finally, he offered the priest a piece of bread from the "priest's host," the loaf shared by the leaders of the liturgy. Reflecting on the incident later, the priest observed, "There is not one food for the merely baptized and another, special food for the somewhat-more-than-baptized."<sup>30</sup> The presider's hesitation troubles our egalitarian, democratic sensibilities. Is not the Holy Spirit present for all in the same way?

For centuries, Christian theology has struggled with the meaning of ordination. In the pre-Nicene church, baptism was clearly the most important rite of the church. With baptism one becomes part of the *laos theou*, the people of God. In reclaiming that notion and reaffirming the ministry of all the baptized, United Methodists are returning to these ancient roots. During medieval times, the notion that ordination brings about an ontological change in the ordinand became more accepted and bolstered the view that the priest acted as mediator between God and

humankind, an idea challenged vigorously by the Protestant Reformers.

For United Methodists, ordination ties us to the whole Christian tradition, requires an evangelical response to the gracious call of the Spirit, and finds concrete expression through our lively pragmatism. As Jack Seymour and I wrote, “Ordination is the Church’s authorization of a person to be ‘set apart’ in his or her calling and to ‘stand for’ the Church in his or her actions.” This definition is consistent with an organic understanding of the nature of the church, where “no ministry is subservient to another.” However, in the same book, we also cautioned, “If we are not careful, we will counter the gains being made in mutuality and partnership. . . . The use of service to designate the work of the ordained will have a tendency to restrict the notion of servanthood to the ordained—to the elder and the deacon.”<sup>31</sup> Ministry is the work of the whole people of God, not just of the ordained.

When it ordains someone, the church depends on the integrity of the individual’s call and on his or her commitment to ministry. The church depends on the thoroughness of its testing of that call and the individual’s fitness for ordination. In addition, it relies on the grace of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the work of the ordinand. The ordained person is not more holy than laypeople; but the church trusts the Holy Spirit to pervade the work for which it sets him or her apart. Thus, the church asks the ordained person to take on a special responsibility for leadership on behalf of the whole body and depends on God to be in it.<sup>32</sup>

Thus understood, ordination does not separate the deacon from the laity, as some have feared. Indeed, the covenant of ordination, based on mutual trust and mutual dependence, establishes an even closer connection between deacon and laity. Leader and people share an “ecological” connection; we are all part of one another. The

health of one affects the health of the whole body. Energy and “nutrients” flow through the whole ecological connection and are shared by all. When the deacon acknowledges a divine call on his or her life, he or she shares that call with the whole people of God. He or she cannot fulfill it alone; and his or her work will enhance the work of all. We need to learn to conceptualize the ministry of our deacons in this holistic way.

## **Who Is the Deacon in The United Methodist Church?**

To *do* or to *be*, that is the question. Unquestionably, deacons are required to show evidence of skills, knowledge, and life practices that are focused on what the deacon can *do*. Deacons must be able to demonstrate their skills of theological analysis and be able to articulate their faith. Deacons must act consistent with Christian faith. However, the deacon must also *be* one who is marked by the act of ordination. The deacon accepts the connection to the Holy Spirit, the Order of Deacons, the people of God, the whole of creation, and to the discipline of the church, with the responsibilities those connections bring. One’s identity—one’s being—is forever different because of these commitments.

Several writers have conceptualized the deacon’s being and doing as sacramental. So, for example, Dwight and Linda Vogel write:

*Contemporary sacramental theology has recognized that Christ is the sacrament of the presence of God, and that the Church is the sacrament of the presence of Christ. We are learning to think in broader and richer ways of the nature of sacrament. We believe that the deacon can serve as sacrament to the Church and for the Church.*<sup>33</sup>

The sacramental nature of the office of deacon does not make the deacon more holy than other baptized persons. However, it bears a special

responsibility for integrity and care in one's work and relationships. In his or her person is embodied the church's sacramental reality.

As the Faith and Order document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* states, "Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life."<sup>34</sup> This interdependence also reiterates the unity of the sacred and the secular in the ministry of the deacon. Barnett writes, "Symbolically, each of these deacons by virtue of the diaconal office asserts the unity of the 'sacred' and the 'secular,' of all of life, another witness much needed in our fragmented world."<sup>35</sup>

A new book by David Clark uses the distinction between the "gathered church" and the "dispersed church" to argue that the presbyter (elder) is primarily related to the gathered church and the deacon is primarily related to the dispersed church. This does not mean that the deacon works only in the world. Instead, the deacon's ministry seeks to empower laity for their Christian vocations. In worship, the deacon offers the Word for the world and brings the concerns of the world for prayer. Clark identifies the church as the home base for the work of a deacon but his or her primary task is to be a "messenger of the kingdom community" to the world.<sup>36</sup> Clark's use of the church gathered and dispersed in this context aligns with the view in *A Deacon's Heart* that the deacon's work is to extend the eucharistic table into the world.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps most powerfully, the deacon is a part of the organic entity that is the church, helping to move it toward its goal of participating fully in the reign of God. Although deacons never enjoy a fixed place or a fixed definition, as Ormonde Plater points out in his important book,<sup>38</sup> deacons are empowered and skilled critically and effectively to

lead and empower the *diakonia* of the people of God. The work of deacons complements and challenges the laity and the elders as it brings focus to our common diaconal ministry in the world. We continue to develop the structures of *diakonia* through careful attention to the traditions of the church, evangelical witness, and a lively pragmatism. Many bumps and potholes lie along this route, and sometimes the structures collapse. However, the possibilities continue to expand.

### **How Is the Deacon Accountable?**

The deacon is accountable in several overlapping ways that often lack clear definition. While this lack of clarity sometimes leaves the deacon vulnerable, it also offers room for creativity and innovation. Because deacons are not part of the itinerant system, they do not have any guarantees of employment. They must find a place with a salary and benefits that are consistent with God's call and claim on their lives. Also, they must articulate this theologically and practically in ways that are acceptable to the bishop under whose supervision they serve. In addition, each deacon must be closely associated with a charge conference in a congregation and is accountable to that entity.<sup>39</sup> Some deacons are employed by a congregation, an annual conference, or other church-related institution; in those cases the working-out of these multiple accountabilities is usually straightforward and smooth. Matters get more complex when a deacon finds that his call leads him into employment that is not connected to the church in an obvious way. In such cases, the deacon is obligated to abide by the rules and procedures of the employer. For instance, deacons who are employed in schools have limited ability to take off time for church meetings. Yet they are constantly under pressure to attend gatherings of the clergy or the Order of Deacons or conference meetings, or to attend continuing education events—all of which often conflict with

their work schedule. In addition, the deacon employed in ministry settings outside the church is expected to be an active leader in a congregation, the secondary appointment. There the deacon is to “take missional responsibility for leading other Christians into ministries of service.”<sup>40</sup> While all deacons are excited about empowering laity for Christian vocation, a local congregation may make impossible demands on the deacon’s time and energy! Often, the deacon is left to negotiate these conflicting expectations and accountabilities with little support from the bishop and cabinet. Examples abound of deacons who were unemployed, often for reasons beyond their control, and who found no help from a bishop or cabinet. The deacon’s responsibility to overlapping and conflicting employment structures can make life difficult.

### **What Is the Promise of the Deacon for the Twenty-First-Century Church?**

How do we organize the church so that all of God’s people are equipped and empowered to live into their vocation under the commandment to love God and neighbor? The primary task of both deacon and elder is to lead in the formation of the people of God in their vocation of discipleship—the way of Jesus. All of us together seek to partner with the Spirit in the transformation of the world, the fulfillment of God’s reign. The vocation of all faithful Christians is to live as signs of God’s gracious reign.

Already, the deacons are creatively defining and clarifying their distinctive role in this task. They are blending churchly tradition as ordained and set-apart clergy with the energy and passion that comes from their evangelical commitments to the divine call and are seeking to spread the good news of God’s reign as best they can with a lively pragmatism to guide them. I envision thousands of deacons, Spirit-led and yet accountable to the church, serving in creative and missional

settings both in and beyond the church as messengers of the gracious reign of God.

Coexisting orders of ordained leaders—one more traditional and the other less bound by earlier models of pastor and parson—will be in creative tension as each offers its distinctive gifts to the church. The tension is most productive when power is equalized by ordination and full membership in the annual conference. A “called” order alongside an “itinerant” order inevitably creates tension. Hierarchies within an organic unity are paradoxical. Contrasting models of ministry that relate to the church in differing ways will also create tensions. However, conflict can be clarifying and energizing as we articulate ever more clearly what God has called us to both do and be. Deacons, laity, and elders will be strengthened as they partner in the mission of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The church must be true to itself, reflecting God’s communal nature and God’s intimate connection to creation that springs from the divine nature. From among the baptized, some are chosen and identified as leaders with special responsibility. Led by the gracious presence of the Spirit, the church recognizes this responsibility with ordination. As I said earlier, ordination does not separate the deacon (or the elder) from the laity but establishes a deeper relationship based on a covenant of mutual trust and interdependence. We are all part of the organic unity of God, church, and creation. Ordination intensifies our sense of and responsibility for the whole. We share an ecological connection; we are all members one of another. Ultimately, as the *Book of Discipline* states, we must convince the world of the reality of the gospel, or leave it unconvinced. The order of deacon offers rich promise for this great work.

## Notes

1. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶128.
2. Margaret Ann Crain and Jack L. Seymour, *A Deacon's Heart: The New United Methodist Diaconate* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 35. I want to thank Jack for his continued support of my work with the Order of Deacons and for his careful reading of this paper. I could not do this without him!
3. Spanish has been added as a required language for simultaneous translation in the plenary sessions for the next gathering.
4. A deaconess from the Philippines, Cristina Manabat, while studying for a Ph.D. at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, has shared powerful stories of the ministry of these women.
5. *Book of Discipline—2004*, ¶1313.
6. Ormonde Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*. Rev. Ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2004), p. xi.
7. For information on Churches Uniting in Christ, see their Web site: <http://www.cuicinfo.org>.
8. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*. Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), available on the Web site of the World Council of Churches at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-com-missions/faith-and-order-commission.html>.
9. Ibid.
10. I am particularly indebted to liturgical scholar Dwight W. Vogel for the phrase “creative partnering.”
11. Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), p. 322.
12. We are particularly indebted to John Collins and H.W. Beyer for careful work on the meanings of *diakonia* in the Gospels.
13. Osvaldo Vena, “Gospel Images of Jesus as Deacon: Upsetting the Hierarchies of His Culture.” Paper written for The Ecumenical Network for the Diaconate, 2001. This paper is available as a monograph (Monograph Series, No. 14), published in 2003 by the North American Association for the Diaconate. See <http://www.diakonoi.org>.
14. James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 7.
15. *Book of Discipline—2004*, ¶¶125, 129.
16. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, 124.
17. Ibid., 88.
18. Ibid., 124–25.
19. Crain and Seymour, *A Deacon's Heart*, p. 43.
20. *Book of Discipline—2004*, ¶303.2.
21. Ibid., ¶¶302, 303.1.
22. See *Book of Discipline—2004*, ¶324.5.c, for a list of the basic graduate theological studies.
23. Frank, *Polity, Practice and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, p. 322.
24. *Book of Discipline—2004*, ¶129.
25. Ibid., ¶201.
26. Ibid., ¶128.
27. See *ibid.*, ¶131.
28. John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
29. See especially the essays by William Herzog II and Warren Carter, as well as those on social patterns and practices, in Richard Horsley, ed., *Christian Origins: A People's History of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).
30. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, p. 165.
31. Crain and Seymour, *Deacon's Heart*, pp. 141, 142.
32. For a fuller discussion of the historical understandings of ordination, see Crain and Seymour, *Deacon's Heart*, pp. 140–45.
33. See Dwight W. and Linda J. Vogel, “Deacons as Sacraments of the Table.” (2006); available online at <http://mystagogy.info/mystagogy2/node/7>.
34. *BEM*, <http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=2638>.
35. Barnett, *The Diaconate*, p. 206.
36. David Clark, *Breaking the Mould of Christendom: Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church, and the*

*Liberation of the Laity* (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2005), p. 112.

37. Crain and Seymour, *Deacon's Heart*, esp. pp. 47–50.
38. See Plater, *Many Servants*, p. xi.
39. Some conferences even require a certain number of hours per week that must be spent in the secondary appointment, effectively requiring the deacon to take on a second job.
40. *Book of Discipline*, ¶331.4.

## For Further Reading

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