

Diaconal Presidency at the Lord's Supper

(A report from the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney)

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Standing Committee has requested the Doctrine Commission to comment on the theological implications of the following notice of motion:

"In the light of Synod resolution 18/85 endorsing the principle of lay presidency and the further report of the 1987 Synod, Standing Committee is requested to bring to the next session of Synod legislation to enable deacons to preside at the Lord's Supper."

1.2 At the outset the Doctrine Commission notes a possible inconsistency in this notice of motion. That is, on the basis of principles stated in two Synod reports on **lay** presidency, there is a call for legislation to enable deacons (**ordained** ministers) to preside.

1.3 The verb preside derives from the Latin *praesidere*, or *sedere* which means "to sit". The English word has the following meanings, to occupy the chair of authority at the meeting of a society or company; to exercise control; to sit or reign supreme. In the context of this paper the terms *presidency* and *preside* are used to refer to the function of conducting a service of Holy Communion where the bread and wine have not been "consecrated" prior to the service itself.

1.4 The Commission further notes that the committee appointed by Archbishop Loane in 1978 "to work on the subject of the meaning and value of ordination and the theology of ordination in our church today" commented that it may be appropriate at certain times for deacons to be allowed to administer the Holy Communion under certain conditions.¹ The specific conditions were –

- (a) that deacons should be permitted to preside in the absence of the priest; and
- (b) the deacon should be licensed to do so by the bishop.

These conditions are modelled on the statements in the Ordinal in relation to deacons being permitted to administer Baptism. Thereby may be deduced a theological base for diaconal presidency.

1.5 It must be noted that the suggestion in that report that deacons should be permitted at times to preside at the Lord's Supper was made because of the particular notion of the priestly role argued there, that is, that the priest is *pastor-in-congregation*. It also accompanied the novel suggestion that priests who were not ministering as *pastor-in-congregation* should possibly "revert to the order of deacon in the event of his relinquishing such a charge". The suggestion that deacons should be permitted to preside at the Lord's Supper was viewed as a desirable corollary of that proposed rule. Though this suggestion was not dissented from in the Synodical reception of that committee report, the ideas stated have never been pursued in the Diocese with any degree of seriousness or commitment.

1.6 As part of the preparation for this short paper on diaconal presidency a literature search was undertaken in the Moore College library. The results demonstrated the wealth of contemporary theological writing on the diaconate from both Protestant and Catholic sources.² However, a perusal of this literature reveals the absence of any discussion on the question of diaconal presidency. Discussions of the traditional ministry and concept of the diaconate, whether focusing on the New Testament, the early church, or the views of the reformers and the Anglican Ordinal, do not touch upon the possibility of deacons presiding at the Lord's Supper. Nor do discussions of contemporary endeavours to renew and restore diaconal ministry as a distinctive servant ministry appropriate to a "full and equal order" appear to consider any possibility of diaconal presidency.

1.7 In the literature search, one article was found which discussed "eucharistic celebrations without priests in the Middle Ages".³ It provided a discussion of the theological emphases of four medieval manuscripts used in monastic services of Holy Communion where no priest was present. One of the manuscripts was the Use of a female community. There is no comment on who assumed the role of president. One can even deduce

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from the text of the article that the provision of the reserved sacrament was the practice. From this point of view the evidence from these manuscripts does not further our discussion of diaconal presidency. However the Commission notes the emphasis from the article that the communities gathered using these particular Rites are regarded as "autentic eucharistic communities", even in the absence of a priest.

2. What is a Deacon? What is the Ministry of a Deacon?

2.1 There are many contemporary statements on the diaconal role and function. Common to them is the concept of the diaconate as a ministry of service, and of assistance to the priest/presbyter and the bishop. For example, *The Final Report* of the first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC- 1) says -

"An essential element in the ordained ministry is its responsibility for "oversight" (*episcopate*). This responsibility involves fidelity to the apostolic faith, its embodiment in the life of the Church today, and its transmission to the Church of tomorrow. Presbyters are joined with the bishop in his oversight of the church and in the ministry of the word and the sacraments; they are given authority to preside at the eucharist and to pronounce absolution. Deacons, although not so empowered, are associated with bishops and presbyters in the ministry of word and sacrament, and assist in oversight."⁴

The Ordained Ministry, II.9

2.2 A contemporary ecumenical statement on the diaconate which also emphasises the servant/assistant nature of the role is to be found in the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document (BEM) from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. It says -

"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. They exercise responsibility in the worship of the congregation ..." ⁵

Ministry, III.C.31

2.3 Useful though these statements may be they must be tested against the primary source of the New Testament, and compared with those from the post-Apostolic Church. The "Form and Manner of Making of Deacons" from the BCP Ordinal provides us with the clearest statement of diaconal ministry in the Anglican church.

2.4 The term *diakonos* means "deacon", "servant", or "minister". There is a non-technical use of the word to be observed in the New Testament. Paul calls himself a *diakonos* of the gospel (Eph 3:7; Col 1:23), of the church (Col 1:25), of Christ (2 Cor 11:23; Col 1:7), and of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6). However the New Testament speaks also of the presence of persons called deacons in some of the congregations - see Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8f, possibly Romans 16:1, and, with less likelihood, Acts 6:1-7. The function of the deacon is not mentioned, though it should be noted that the deacon is referred to together with the presbyter/bishop (except for the incidental reference to Phoebe and leaving aside the Acts passage). The "qualifications" in the Pastoral Epistles closely parallel those of the presbyter. Many assume that this implies that the two offices are related and involved in somewhat similar duties. Deacons receive far fewer references than presbyters, and where they are connected they are mentioned second. This may lead to the assumption that they are the presbyters' assistants. The BCP Ordinal presumes that this is the case.

2.5 Certainly the term *diakonos* carries the root meaning of service or servant. If the incident in Acts 6 tells us anything, it is that the church early experienced the need for a ministry of service and assistance, of Christian caring for the material needs of others while at the same time leaving the apostolic band free to devote themselves to prayer and the preaching of the Word.

2.6 Did the deacon preside at the Lord's Supper in the apostolic communities? The New Testament is silent about whether there was a presidential role, let alone who filled it. However most people would argue that responsibility for the Lord's Supper belonged to the presbyters who had the responsibility of teaching, oversight and rule. For example, this idea is to be found in a Catholic commentary on Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*. The statement is "In the primitive Church priests presided at the Eucharist because they presided over the christian community". ⁶ There are some who would argue, contra to the above, that it is more likely that the local church patron, in whose house the church met, presided at the shared meal and the Lord's Supper. In the long run the silence in the New Testament inhibits any firm conclusion.

2.7 The ministry of the deacon developed alongside that of bishop and presbyter in the post-Apostolic church. The diaconate does not seem to have become a stepping-stone to priesthood until the fourth century. Prior to then it seems to have been a permanent ministry.

2.8 Ignatius wrote that the ministry of the deacon is "the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before all ages and has been manifested in the final time" (Magnesians 6: 1). He urged that "the deacons too, who are ministers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, should please all in every way; for they are not servants of

food and drink, but ministers of the church of God" (Trallians 2,3). Polycarp emphasised their ministry of service - "Likewise the deacons should be blameless before his [God's] righteousness, as servants of God and Christ and not of men; not slanderers, or double-tongued, not lovers of money, temperate in all matters, compassionate, careful, living according to the truth of the Lord, who became a servant of all" (Philippians 5:2).

2.9 Later the deacon was viewed as closely connected to the bishop - in fact his man - "the bishop's ear, mouth, heart and soul" (Didascalia 3:13). Hippolytus wrote -

"When the deacon is ordained, this is the reason why the bishop alone shall lay hands upon him: he is not ordained to the priesthood but to serve the bishop and to carry out the bishop's commands" (Apostolic Tradition 9:2-4).

He saw the deacon at the disposal of the bishop in order that he may serve the whole people of God and take care of the sick and the poor (ibid 39 and 34).

2.10 The third century appears to have been the "heyday" of the deacon. Later after a struggle *vis a vis* roles with the presbyter the diaconate became a preliminary step to priesthood.

2.11 The BCP Ordinal provides a careful account of the role and function of the deacon in the ordained ministry of the Anglican Church. First of all, the deacon, like the bishop and priest, cannot be ordained unless they have been "called tried and examined" for their fitness for their ministry (see the Preface to the Ordinal). This fulfils the requirement of Article XXIII *Of Ministering in the Congregation*.

2.12 The Bishop's Charge outlines the functions of the deacon -

- (a) to assist the priest in divine service and in the administration of Holy Communion;
- (b) to read the Scriptures and Homilies in the church;
- (c) to instruct the youth in the Catechism;
- (d) in the absence of the priest to baptise infants;
- (e) to preach if licensed to do so by the bishop;
- (f) to search for the sick, poor and impotent people of the parish, to indicate their names and places of residence to the Incumbent so that they might be assisted with the aims of the parishioners.

Thus the BCP statement of the role and function of the deacon emphasises a ministry of assistance and service.

2.13 While it is tangential to the focus of this paper it may be useful to compare the functions of the deacon set out in both the service for the Making of Deacons in the AAPB Ordinal and the service for the Ordination of Deacons which is contained in the Schedule to the General Synod Ordination Service for Deacons Canon 1985. This latter service is now in use in most diaconal ordination services in the dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia.

2.14 The AAPB service is in fact the BCP service in contemporary English. The same functions of the diaconal role are present. These are -

- (a) to assist the priest in divine service;
- (b) to help him in the administration of the holy communion;
- (c) to read the holy scriptures in church;
- (d) to give instruction to young people in the Christian faith as contained in the Church-Catechism;
- (e) to baptise infants when the priest is absent;
- (f) to preach if he is licensed to do so by the bishop;
- (g) where provision is so made, to seek out the sick and needy of the parish and inform the priest so that they may be assisted by the parishioners and others.

A comparison of the AAPB Charge to those being ordained priest shows that there is a similarity of function between deacon and priest, for priests teach, forewarn, feed and provide. This makes the words "assist the priest", "help him", and "inform the priest" used in relation to the deacon to be highly significant. It reinforces the notion of diaconal ministry as a ministry of assistance. Is it significant that the priest is to "seek for Christ's sheep ..." while there is no mention of this seeking in the diaconal functions?

2.15 The modern distinctive diaconate movement emphasises the role of the deacon as servant to the church and to the world. This emphasis is the overriding force in the bishop's charge and examination in the 1985 service. The functions of the diaconal role as stated are -

"My *brothers*, every believer is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father in the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit. God now calls you to a special ministry of service under the care of your bishop.

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You are to serve the church of God and to work with its members in caring for the sick, the needy, and all who are in trouble. By your teaching and your life you are to show Christ's people that in serving others we are serving Christ himself. You are to make his redemptive love known, by word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship.

You are to share with the community the love of Christ and his gospel of reconciliation and hope. You are to pray and work for peace and justice in the world.

As deacons, you are to model your life according to the word of God. You are to be faithful in prayer, and take your place with bishop, priest and people in public worship and at the administration of the sacraments.

You are to strengthen the faithful, teach the young search out the careless and the indifferent, and to preach the word of God in the place to which you are licensed.⁷

What is meant by the phrase "take your place with bishop, priest and people ..." in the 4th paragraph? Possibly it means "participate with". Since the people are included we may infer that there is no hint here of a presiding function though this would not be antithetical to the diaconal function set out. The 5th paragraph makes "preaching the word of God" integral to this diaconal ministry and not an optional function.

2.16 The emphasis on the servant ministry in church and world of this 1985 service impresses the understanding that the order of deacons is a "full and equal order" alongside the ministry of priest and bishop, and that it is not mere transitional state for apprentice priests. However, it must be noted that the concept of the ministry of the deacon as a ministry of assistance, especially in parochial ministry, is missing from this functional statement. This emphasis has been retained in the Ordinals of most of the Provinces of the Anglican Communion and it makes this Australian service somewhat unique⁸. Some may even presume that the deacons who are ordained with the use of this 1985 service are different deacons.

3. Can this Notion of the Ministry of the Deacon Allow for Diaconal Presidency?

3.1 It is important to note that the BCP statement of the role and function of the deacon allows for the deacon to baptise (in the absence of the priest) and to preach (if licensed by the bishop). In these two permissions we find the basis for an argument to support the case for diaconal presidency at the Lord's Supper.

3.2 Article XXV states that there are two dominical sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The deacon is permitted to preside at one (baptism), but only to assist at the other (the Lord's Supper). It appears that a wedge is driven between these two sacraments "ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel" by allowing a difference in the ministry of them within the congregation. If the deacon can be the minister who baptises, why cannot the deacon be the minister who presides at the Lord's Supper? There is no sense in the New Testament, or in the Prayer Book, that one is more central than the other. Indeed the BCP Catechism states that both are "generally necessary to salvation". It should also be noted that it is widely held in the Christian tradition that baptism is the fundamental requisite for admission to the Lord's Supper. It is therefore inconsistent to allow the role of baptising minister to the deacon but not that of presiding minister at the Lord's Supper.

3.3 The Bishop's Charge gives permission for the deacon to preach, if she/he is licensed to do so by the Bishop (and, one presumes, if the Incumbent is also prepared to give permission). The reformed theology which undergirds the Ordinal does not permit a separation of Word and Sacrament, for the Sacrament is a *sign* of the Word (preached). Therefore there cannot be any separation of Word and Sacrament. Some would argue that to allow a deacon to preach the gospel at the Lord's Supper, but not to preside is to drive a wedge between Sacrament and Word, or to raise the thing which signifies (Sacrament) to a higher level than that which is signified (Word) even if it is granted that it is not necessary for the one who presides to be the preacher at the service. Diaconal presidency, especially when the deacon has preached the sermon, would be an indication that Word and Sacrament are an indivisible whole.

3.4 The case for lay presidency might give the appearance of allowing the traditional ordering of ministry in the Anglican Church to be overturned in that it would permit congregational representatives who would not be "called, tried, examined and sent" to be presiding at the Lord's Supper. That is not the view of this Commission (see the report *Lay Presidency at Holy Communion*). The case for diaconal presidency asks for ministers who have been recognised as gifted for ministry, and ordained by the bishop, who have been therefore "called, tried, examined and sent", to preside at the Lord's Supper. The traditional Anglican ordering of ministry as expressed in the Thirty-Nine Articles, that is, Article XXIII, is not set aside by diaconal presidency.

3.5 Diaconal presidency can also be seen as an outworking of the ministry of assistance to the priest, or in the priest's absence the bishop, which is fundamental to the diaconal role. The bishop's charge in the BCP Ordinal states that the deacon would be able to Baptise "in the absence of the priest". It would be a logical extension of diaconal ministry of assistance to the priest for the bishop to license the deacon to preside at the Lord's Supper "in the absence of the priest", and at the request of the priest.

3.6 The case for diaconal presidency is particularly important in any discussion of a permanent distinctive diaconal ministry. It does not seem so urgent a question for those who may be called *transitional* deacons, who are waiting to become priests and normally will only be deacons for ten months at the most. However, the distinctive deacons whose ministry is permanently assistance and service must regard the question as more urgent and fundamental to their role. Such deacons are very often ministering in positions which are outside parish ministry. They may be hospital or gaol chaplains, school or tertiary chaplains, or industrial chaplains. Their ministry is therefore a ministry not related to assisting any Incumbent, but directly related to the appointing and licensing prerogatives of the bishop. It is entirely appropriate in their servant ministry that the deacon, who is qualified and licensed to preach, should be able to preside when the faithful gather for the Lord's Supper in the places where a deacon, and not a priest, is the one who exercises the ministry. It is demeaning to the ministry of both deacon and priest if in such situations the deacon is the minister encountered day by day by the faithful but the priest is brought in whenever the Lord's Supper is held. It is right for the minister who has pastoral care of the faithful to be the one who presides at the Lord's Supper. The priest who is introduced simply to preside at the Lord's Supper, but who has no continuing teaching and pastoral role in relation to a congregation, is turned into a "Mass priest".

3.7 It is possible that Anglicans in isolated communities would be interested in this question of diaconal presidency, for in such places it is hard for a bishop to maintain a continuing ministry where the population is so small or so scattered that it is difficult to find resources to support the ministry of a priest. If diaconal presidency was an available option a bishop may well ordain local leaders to the diaconate but not to the priesthood. As deacons they could be given permission by the bishop to preside at the Lord's Supper as an assistant to the bishop himself who may well take the role of "titular" presbyter of that congregation. In this case the deacon would be assisting the ministry of the bishop and therefore fulfilling the historic function of the diaconate.

4. Conclusion

4.1 From the perspective of this argument, there would appear to be no theological objection to legislation which would enable deacons to preside at the Holy Communion.

For and on behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney

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Chairman

27 September 1993

Endnotes

1. *Ordination. Its Meaning, Value and Theology.*, AIO Edition, Sydney, 1981, pp. 13-14.
2. A full, but by no means exhaustive bibliography on the diaconate, is appended to this paper.
3. Jean Leclercq, *Eucharistic Celebrations Without Priests In the Middle Ages*, (ed.) R. Kevin Seasoltz, *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1987, pp. 222f.
4. *The Final Report*, Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, CTS/SPCK, Great Britain, 1982., pp. 33-34.
5. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, WCC, Geneva, 1982, p. 27.
6. Quoted in Hervé-Marie Legrand, *The Presidency of the Eucharist According to the Ancient Tradition*, (ed.) R. Kevin Seasoltz, op. cit., p. 196.
7. Ordination Service for Deacons Canon 1985, *The Constitution and Canons of The Anglican Church of Australia 1992*, General Synod Office, Sydney, 1992, p. 133.
8. See, for example, the Bishops' Charge from the Service for the Ordination of Deacons from the *Alternative Services Book* of the Church of England -

"Deacons are called to serve the Church of God, and to work with its members in caring for the poor, the needy, the sick and all who are in trouble. They are to strengthen the faithful, search out the careless and the indifferent, and to preach the word of God in the places to which they are licensed. Deacons assist the priests under whom they serve, in leading the worship of the people, especially in the administration of the Holy Communion. They may baptise when required to do so. It is their general duty to do such pastoral work as is entrusted to them."

Diaconal Presidency - Bibliography

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