

**A THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT ON
ORDAINED MINISTRY AND DISCERNMENT
IN THE DIOCESE OF OHIO**

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INTRODUCTION

The whole Church is responsible for raising up ordained leaders of the highest quality with the particular gifts necessary for leading faith communities in the 21st century. Therefore, both the individual and community are simultaneously participating in a process of mutual discernment and affirmation. To that end, the bishop and other representatives of the Church strive to exercise prayerful spiritual discernment and pastoral sensitivity with those who believe they might be called to ordained ministry. All diocesan committees and psychological interviewers are advisory. The final decision about ordination rests with the bishop.

Theology and Character of the Diaconate
in the
Diocese of Ohio

As baptized Christians, we are all given the power to share in the priesthood and ministry of Jesus Christ. We are all called to be servants and give our lives in service to others. We are joined with each other in this vocation as the Church. As the early Christian community grew, certain persons were given particular roles for the good order of the community and its ministry in the world. Bishops, presbyters and deacons were ordained to serve the people of God and to support all baptized persons in living out their ministries. These same orders are present in the Church today and have distinctive charisms:

The deacon is an icon of Christ's bold love of the disenfranchised and his prophetic call for justice. The deacon is one who inspires the baptized to claim their authority as ministers of Christ in the world, especially in places of greatest need. ***The deacon has eyes for the world and a heart to empower the baptized.*** The priest is an icon of Christ's self-emptying love, one whose disposition is for blessing and care. ***A priest has eyes for the local Church and a heart to bless and care for her people.*** The bishop is an icon of Christian unity, one who is the guardian of the community of the faithful. She is one whose disposition is for wholeness and reconciliation with God and one another. ***A bishop has eyes for the whole Church and a heart to uphold the mystery of the body of Christ.***

Deacon or *diakonia* comes from the Greek word meaning "service." The diaconate is a distinctive and significant order, though embodied and interpreted differently throughout the church's history. The ministry of the deacon develops as the needs of the Church and world determine. Recently, the Diocese of Ohio's discernment of the role of its deacons has changed significantly. While once deacons were encouraged to find their individualized ministries and be

the primary agents of service, advocacy and justice, we now see the deacon as the one who challenges the Church with the needs of the world and calls **all the baptized as the primary agents of service**. Ohio understands the deacon as the one who has eyes for the world and a heart to empower the body of Christ to serve all the children of God. The ministry of the deacon is one of teaching, inviting, challenging and encouraging the faithful to fulfill their baptismal promises.

As a leader of the Church in the world the deacon's ministry may not occur primarily within the walls of the Church. The deacon may have particular experience in any number of service/justice-oriented areas, such as community organizing, legal advocacy, issues of hunger or housing. However, the deacon's vocation is to empower the faithful to service. The deacon does not carry a particular agenda, but rather, as a servant of the Church, (s)he listens to and draws out the ministries emerging within a geographic region, deanery or Church.

Ohio understands that the deacon is called to ministry and guided by the *pastoral direction and leadership of the bishop* (BCP, p. 543). The deacon, as a collaborator, extends the ministry of unity within the Church, and is therefore extra-parochial. That is to say, assignments of deacons are made by the bishop to regions, perhaps even to local churches, as the ministry in a particular region demands. *The deacon will likely **not** be placed in the parish from which they have come (the "home" parish).*

As strong leaders, Ohio's deacons will have:

- A genuine interest in and empathy for all people, incorporating Ohio's broad spectrum of social, economic, racial, religious, and political differences.
- A strong interest in community building within the Church and outside the Church.
- An energy and enthusiasm that inspires others and enjoys shared ministry and the participation of all.
- An expectation and hope in the Spirit's movement in the church and world and a deep desire for joy and prophetic proclamation.
- A conviction that all the baptized are instruments of God's justice and mercy and, as with the ancient prophets, have such a love for the Church as to call all the baptized to account when we are silent, complacent or impervious to the needs of the marginalized.
- A resilience and flexibility in response to the Spirit's spontaneity, and a willingness, like all servants, to be shaped and transformed by the needs of the Church.
- A maturing sense of self, centered in God, from which they find affirmation to live out their lives and ministries.

Expectations of the Deacon

Ordination to the diaconate is never a validation of one's lay ministry. Neither is the deacon one step away from a priest. The deacon's vocation is distinct in its own right.

A deacon has the responsibility to preach the gospel. Her focus is primarily prophetic, interpreting the needs of the world to the Church. A priest's preaching focus, on the other hand, is to cultivate, form, and ground the body of the faithful.

The deacon's liturgical function always emphasizes the needs of the community surrounding the local church and our response to those needs as faithful servants of Christ. For example, the deacon proclaims the gospel to the gathered congregation, symbolizing the gospel's relevance to the world in the midst of the church. The deacon leads the people in prayer, expressing the engagement of the baptized with the needs of God's world. The deacon sets the table, acting as an icon of the servanthood of Christ in the community of the faithful. The deacon leads the congregation into the world, where their lives become the means by which the world comes to know the love and power of God.

Although there may be a minor pastoral dimension to the work of a deacon, pastoral care is never the primary focus of the deacon's ministry. Pastoral care is the work of the priest and of Eucharistic Visitors or Stephen Ministers appropriately mentored by a priest.

In summary, deacons run the risk, because of their prophetic character, of being independent, even isolated, ministers within the Church. Not so in the Diocese of Ohio where the deacon, as an extension of the bishop's ministry of unity, calls the whole Church into cooperative, collaborative service. They are a people *who lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* (Ephesians 4:1-4)

Any person considering applying for ordination and any clergy person participating in an applicant's discernment should be aware of the following Episcopal Church canon:

No one shall be denied access to the selection process for ordination in this Church because of race, color, ethnic, sex, national origin, marital status, sexual orientations, disabilities or age, except as otherwise specified by these canons. No right to ordination is hereby established.