



The Diakonia of The United Church of Canada

Part #2 Diaconal Identity: Many Stories

It has been said, “When you have met one Diaconal Minister, you will know exactly one Diaconal Minister. The next one you meet will be different from the first.” In the midst of our diversity, we share a deep sense of call to *diakonia* and a common history. We experience a similar process of theological education and preparation for ministry, and we find significance in particular symbols, images, stories, values, and music. We are connected through a global network of *diakonia*, compelled by a shared vision, called and prepared to serve where needed.

Part #1 History of Diaconal Ministry (the other resource in this package) describes the diversity of ministries started in the early church ... caring for sick, poor, widows and orphans, preparing believers for baptism, and offering hospitality for the gathered faith communities. Through the years this pastoral and relational focus in the wider community remained constant and expanded to include an educational focus within faith communities gathered for worship, education, and nurturing people’s witness in the world. In order to meet emerging needs for leadership, our education and training became based in an experiential adult education model with an emphasis on developing leadership within faith communities and working in team with other ministry personnel and with congregational leaders. This history, and the ministries described in it, have shaped our collective identity in ministry.

Today, in the United Church, 80% of Diaconal Ministers serve a pastoral charge as the only ordered minister.

Alongside the general trends, Diaconal Ministers have offered vitally important ministries that reflect the diversity of diaconal ministry and its capacity to respond to a wide range of ministry needs. We have worked in virtually every country in which the United Church has overseas personnel. We have worked with First Nations peoples in most provinces and territories, with successive waves of immigrants and refugees, with mentally ill people living on the street, with trade unions and co-operatives, with non-governmental organizations addressing issues from children’s health to climate change. We have served as chaplains in hospitals, correctional service facilities, and community chaplaincies. We serve in rural communities and urban core ministries. Diaconal Ministers have also offered ministry in theological schools and educational centres, and in Conferences and the General Council Offices of the United Church, serving as General Secretary, Moderator, Executive Secretaries, and program staff. Our education and training prepares us for the wide range of challenges facing the church and society today.

Understanding diaconal ministry requires knowing the stories of Diaconal Ministers. You can find these stories on-line on the [DUCC website](#) (check the Profiles and the In Memoriam sections) and the [Deaconess History](#) website. Our stories reflect our experience as indigenous peoples and as settlers, as activists and contemplatives, as able-bodied people and people living with illness and disabilities, as people with years of experience in leadership and as people getting used the idea of being leaders.

I am clearest about my diaconal identity when...

my ministry is accepted as a valuable expression of the diversity of ministries.

I see action coming from the discussions and meetings. When I am taking my diaconal identity beyond the church.

I enable a person or group through the process of assessment, action, and reflection and the person or group feels more confident in doing this for themselves.

I am able to offer leadership in non-hierarchical models. When I’m using my diaconal leadership style, - enabling all voices to be heard.

I am working in team ministry.

I am part of the fabric of other people’s lives through music and crafts or opening scripture through art.

I am working with a community of faith in a crisis - as they reflect, learn and find hope for the future.

Community and Culture

Diaconal Ministers often talk of community being essential to our ministry. Individually and collectively, we strive to keep diaconal ministry vibrant and responsive to the needs of the world and church. Our experience in Diaconal community starts in our theological education as we learn to share responsibility for our own learning and the learning of all students, as we develop skills in leadership, teaming, self-awareness, relating respectfully to others, group dynamics, dealing with conflict, and as we learn the history and global dimensions of diaconal ministry. After graduating we meet with other Diaconal Ministers in clusters within our Conferences, enjoying fellowship, sharing meals, discussing denominational issues and concerns, and sharing ideas and resources to strengthen our ministry in the world.

We create and sustain diaconal communities within our denominational association - **Diakonia of The United Church of Canada**. Some of us meet regularly with Diaconal Ministers outside of Canada at the gatherings of Diakonia of the Americas and Caribbean (DOTAC) and we participate in the global gatherings of World Diakonia. In these ecumenical gatherings we learn about other diaconal communities that are faithful to the call to diaconal ministry in their own contexts. We are an intentional community of learning and action.

We help to shape the regional and global diaconal networks and we are shaped by and called forth by them. Community building is not just what we do for ourselves; it is also how we do ministry with others. In congregations and in society we help to create communities in which people can discern gifts, develop skills, nurture leadership, and respond faithfully to the challenges of their contexts.

There are aspects of diaconal ministry that are part of our diaconal culture, engrained in our formation... respecting diverse gifts and challenges, expecting that each person has something to share and insight into what is needed, sharing leadership with others, and resisting hierarchical models of leadership and decision-making. Diaconal Ministers are trained to assist others in their ministries. Sometimes this is called enabling or empowering others, but often it is offered by modeling leadership in accompanying others as they live out their faith.

If you have met a Diaconal Minister you have probably learned about her/his commitment to addressing injustice. Diaconal culture is highly committed to transformation – personal and social. Diaconal Ministers work with people who want to learn more about their faith, provide effective leadership in their congregation or community organizations, and are engaged with social, economic, and environmental justice issues. We believe this is inherent in God’s call.

Our education and training for diaconal ministry is comprehensive and includes supervised ministry placements, intensive learning circles, courses, reading, assignments, and a global perspectives component. We work with learning facilitators, diaconal mentors, and vision keepers. We learn from staff, resource people, and one another. We learn about the church and the world and we learn about ourselves.

Transformation is not easy. Discerning God’s urging in our personal lives and in society is challenging. Diaconal Ministers have learned valuable analytical skills in personal growth, faith development, social justice, and organizational change. We believe these skills are important for our church today as it becomes the church of the future.

We best express our diaconal identity when . .

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- our purpose to enable diakonia is understood and we are able to use our training to strengthen the church’s diakonia.
- we are grounded in community
- we engage in crucial social justice issues of our society
- we encourage people to participate, speak, take action
- we speak truth to power
- we put flesh to discipleship (with others in community)
- we are hospitable and invitational
- we are intercultural – in our perspective and practice.
- we form circles and listen to one another
- we tell stories
- we respond to wounded places and offer advocacy and help people to move beyond wounded places