

UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

DIACONAL MINISTRY IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA:  
FUNCTION, STYLE AND PERSPECTIVE

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## Introduction

This project explores diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada. In United Church polity, ministry has been structured into one order with two streams: those ordained to a ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care, and those commissioned to a diaconal ministry of Education, Service and Pastoral Care. Diaconal ministers testify that they are subjected to repeated demands to explain themselves. They realize that “diaconal” is an unfamiliar term to many people in this denomination. Consequently, much confusion surrounds the nature, purpose and direction of the diaconate. It is a minority ministry in the United Church. Less than seven per cent of the order of ministry are designated diaconal. In large measure, diaconal ministers feel misunderstood, marginalized and invisible. A permanent sense of identity may be elusive for diaconal ministers. Nevertheless, the work of constantly explaining this vocation can lead to an enriching, dynamic, evolving sense of purpose and call.

Diaconal ministry had its roots in the Christian scriptures. The Greek word *diakonia*, meaning service, was used many times throughout the gospels and scriptural letters. In the sayings attributed to Jesus, this word describes his ministry, “I am among you as one that serves” (Luke 22:27). With this word his vision of the ministry to which all are called is expressed: “If anyone would be first, they must be last and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). The word is used as a verb,

*diakon*, meaning to wait upon and as a noun, *diakonia*, signifying office and function (Ephesians 4:11-16). The title, *diakon*, named a person who performs the service (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The concept *diakonia* and its use in the Christian testament was rich and complex. It had obvious connections and parallels with concepts and images contained in the Hebrew scriptures, such as in the work of the mid-wives, prophets, levites, collectors of alms, synagogue attendants and the call to care for the widows and orphans. These biblical traditions are not the focus of this thesis. They will be briefly discussed in chapter two as part of assessing the importance of scriptural images and ideas for functional understandings of diaconal ministry in the United Church of Canada.

The diaconate has undergone many changes through the centuries and has been understood in a variety of ways. In the first century, a three-fold ministry consisting of the offices of deacon, presbyter and bishop emerged, but the roles were “loosely defined and often interchangeable.”<sup>1</sup> The role of the diaconate included teaching, administration, liturgy, preaching and care for the poor. By the second century, ministry roles had become more hierarchical. The role of the diaconate included most of the same functions but the assignment as the bishop’s assistant was developed and sub-diaconate roles were identified such as acolyte, exorcist, reader, doorkeeper, singer. By the time of Constantine in the fourth century, the diaconate was relegated to an inferior status. Those in the diaconate were banned from the celebration of the eucharist and ceased to form part of the

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<sup>1</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1993), p. 7.

bishop's staff. Ministry within the early church moved from an organic, organizational model where rank and status were not considerations, to a highly ordered structure where hierarchy and position were emphasized. By the eighth century, the diaconate had all but disappeared from the western church, with only a few notable exceptions in the eastern church. While the recognized and formal diaconate was all but eliminated, significant persons and movements embodied qualities of the diaconate through the Middle Ages: Alcuin, Hildebrand, Francis of Assisi, Little Gidding, the Beguines. The revival of the diaconate through the Kaiserwerth and the deaconess movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the most immediate link to the diaconate of today. While historical perspective of diaconal ministry was an important consideration in attempting to clarify an understanding of the diaconate in our time, an exhaustive historical investigation is outside the scope of this project. Such studies have been undertaken by others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See: Jeannine Olson, One Ministry Many Roles: Deacons and Deaconnesses through the Centuries (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992); James M. Barnett, The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order (New York: Seabury Press, 1981 revised 1995); Nancy T. Heimer, "Where Did Deacons Originate?" pp. 13-32 in In the Fullness of Time: A History of Women in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), editors, Fran Craddock, Martha Faw, and Nancy Heimer (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999); Mary Anne MacFarlane, Carol Stevenson Seller, and Dawn Wood, "The History of Diaconal Ministry" (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1987).

In the ecumenical church, diaconal ministry has been understood from a variety of perspectives. In some traditions, diaconal ministry is seen as a stepping stone, a transitional order. Within these traditions, some are attempting to re-vitalize the “permanent” or “vocational” diaconate. In some denominations, members of the diaconate are considered lay ministers and receive no financial compensation. In other denominations, members of the diaconate have been considered members of the order of ministry with full pay equity. In some denominations male deacons and female deaconesses have different roles, while in other denominations, gender equality is adamantly defended. In some traditions, the diaconate has been involved in administration of sacraments, while in other traditions, this is unthinkable as part of the diaconal work. The functions and roles of diaconal ministry have varied from liturgical emphases to charitable functions, from pastoral care to social advocacy, from administration to education. This diversity has been seen as a blessing. This diversity has also added to the confusion and lack of clarity regarding diaconal ministry. Although the work of discerning and organizing the range of approaches and understandings within the international diakonia movement could be very interesting, this project focuses on the diaconate within the United Church of Canada.

In addition to differences in role definition and function, a variety of theological understandings have surrounded diaconal ministry. While service has been the traditional key image for diaconal ministry, some people have interpreted service from a perspective of humility, highlighting self-denial, while other people have rejected any notion of subservience. Some have highlighted

justice as the main theme of diaconal ministry, advocating transformation where poverty and oppression exist. While others have favoured a mercy model of caring for and accompanying the undervalued and excluded. Some have named co-leading and co-learning and emphasized collaboration and mutuality. Others have identified responsive flexibility and adaptability as a foremost concern. Some have placed community at the centre of their vision of the diaconate. Others have stressed the importance of living on-the-edge with the marginalized. These concepts have not been mutually exclusive. The complexity and breadth of these ideas add to the richness of meaning. Yet the differences have reflected tensions in understanding and have complicated an already complex situation. This project tests a conceptual framework for understanding diaconal ministry.

In this project, United Church diaconal ministers witnessed to their sense of invisibility and isolation. In their own voices they explained their feelings of being misunderstood and marginalized. As a minority within the order of ministry of the United Church, diaconal ministers understood that to most people in this denomination were unacquainted with the term diaconal. Diaconal ministers related stories that illustrated how they are often asked to interpret their ministries over against ordained ministries. This often left them feeling that ordained ministry was normative and their ministry was abnormal. In this study, some discussion focuses on the differences between ordained and diaconal ministries, yet every attempt is made to identify and honour diaconal ministry as a ministry on its own terms. Yet due to the variety of perceptions and expressions that exist in

diaconal ministry, understanding it on its own terms is not easy.

This project aims to clarify diaconal ministry by examining three aspects: function, style and perspective. First, this study explores a functional understanding of diaconal ministry. A functional understanding has been the way that United Church polity delineated diaconal ministry using the categories of education, service and pastoral care. Biblically, historically, ecumenically, and within the United Church of Canada itself, the set of functions and tasks undertaken by those in diaconal ministry has varied tremendously. It is only in recent times that the United Church has categorized diaconal ministry by the work of education, service, and pastoral care. These foci have located diaconal ministries within the employment framework of what they did, and how their time was occupied. Defining these ministries in a functional framework, however, served to confine a vision of ministry that could not be limited to a set of tasks. It confused a way of being in ministry with a job description. Furthermore, others who are not identified with the diaconate also engaged in the work of education, service and pastoral care. This project suggests that a functional lens is not an adequate way to comprehend diaconal ministry; function has limited usefulness.

Second, this study explores an understanding of diaconal ministry based on style. A variety of styles have been used to describe diaconal ministry in the United Church. Such styles include the commitment to co-leading and co-learning, the vision of mutuality and empowerment, the openness to learning and growth, the responsibility of prophetic witness. In comparison with function, style honours a way of being and not just doing. Such noble commitments and

approaches, however, are difficult to interpret, enact and evaluate. Furthermore, they are not unique to diaconal ministry. It is not enough to comprehend diaconal ministry only through the lens of style; style has a strong but limited usefulness.

Third, this project suggests an alternative framework, that of perspective. Perspective relates to the way diaconal ministers see the world and the location from which they view it. Perspective is a way of defining identity. Included within this concept of perspective are the elements of diaconal theology, community, marginality, justice, and integration. Gift, call and service are some of the theological and biblical images incorporated by diaconal ministers when explaining their vocation. The communal element of perspective encompasses the diaconal sense of continuity, identity, support and accountability through biblical and historical roots, national and ecumenical organizations and informal connections and networks. The element of marginality includes the diaconal ministers' dilemma of being forgotten and overlooked, "on the margins" of the church and the consequence of seeing the world, to some extent, from the underside. The element of justice reflects diaconal ministers' understanding of solidarity, accompaniment, and advocacy. The element of integration indicates the diaconal commitment to holistic, non-dualistic consideration of action and reflection, personal and political, sacred and secular. In comparison with function and style, perspective adds depth and clarity to an understanding of diaconal ministry.

Diakonal ministry has had much to offer the church, yet it has often been misunderstood, invisible or ignored. Part of the pattern has been related to the

difficulty in its definition. In this thesis, it is argued that while diaconal ministry can offer a particular function and style, one of its greatest gifts is in the perspective it offers. Perspective does not provide a simple, clear-cut definition of diaconal ministry, but it does offer a particular witness in the church and in the world. It also allows for a developing, vibrant sense of purpose and vocation.

In addition to reviewing and utilizing United Church of Canada documents and secondary studies relating to diaconal ministry, this project has relied on primary research. Such primary research involved the organizing of focus groups of diaconal ministers from the United Church of Canada. While secondary sources provided a foundation for this study, the focus groups enabled the researcher to test the thesis regarding perspective. An open-ended interview method was utilized within the focus groups, as a way to explore the aspects of function, style and perspective. Focus groups allowed for dialogical interaction among the participants and permitted them to consider and reconsider their responses as they heard other viewpoints and experiences. Other methods, such as a survey or structured interview, were not chosen because the focus group methodology encouraged conversational exchange, honoured evolving understanding, and respected the process of communal development. As a research tool, focus groups were congruent with the communal educational approach that diaconal ministers practice, espouse and with which they have familiarity.

Focus group sessions began with a time of introductions and greetings. The conversation was initially facilitated with a series of open-ended questions.

(Appendix A) The conversation was not restricted to these questions, however, since it was important to explore the new directions and images suggested in the discussion. The initial questions did define and set the parameters of the discussion by focussing on the major points of the thesis, namely, misunderstanding and ambiguity, function, style and perspective. In this way, discussion was not free-flowing, but did allow for some freedom of direction.

Prior to using these questions in focus groups, the questions were tested for clarity by sharing them with colleagues and diaconal ministers not involved in the focus groups. Prior to the focus groups gatherings, the questions were circulated to participants. (Appendix B) Participants were asked to sign a waiver indicating their commitment to maintain confidentiality of other participants' remarks, giving permission to tape record the process and acknowledging that their insights would be used in the thesis project. (Appendix C) Every attempt was made to maintain the anonymity of participants in the reporting.(Appendix D)<sup>3</sup> Copies of the initial report were also circulated to participants for their comments and corrections.

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<sup>3</sup>As there was a participant who refused to give permission for the tape recordings to be stored in the Centre for Christian Studies library, these tapes will be destroyed upon completion of this project.

A total of twelve diaconal ministers participated in four focus groups which met in Winnipeg during the summer of 2001. Those participating were known to the researcher through United Church diaconal networks. Co-workers of the researcher and students currently enrolled in his place of employment, the Centre for Christian Studies, were not included in the study because of potential conflict of interest. Reluctance to participate in the project was minimal; only one person declined participation because of time constraints. Those contacted were chosen to represent a significant diversity. Participants represented variety of lengths of time in diaconal ministry. One participant had been in diaconal ministry for decades and was approaching retirement. Another participant had been commissioned for only a short time. Half of the participants had been in diaconal ministry less than a decade. Participants received their professional training during different time periods and from different schools or programs. Seven of the participants represented four decades of the residential and regional programs of the Centre for Christian Studies (and its predecessors), while five of the participants were graduates from three other programs of training for diaconal ministry within the United Church of Canada. The participants represented a range in their places of employment. Of the six who worked in congregational settings, three were in team ministry situations; three were in "solo" ministry settings. Three worked in church institutional settings in educational ministry. Two served in church outreach ministries. Two ministered in social agencies and were not employed by the church. The number of participants situated in rural settings were limited, although some had significant rural experiences in the past.

Most of the participants were women, caucasian, heterosexual. Needless to say, the small sample of participants does not allow for analysis based on gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

The researcher took extensive notes during the focus group conversations. The conversations were also tape recorded. Because of logistical and financial reasons and to protect confidentiality, transcripts of the conversations were not made. Following the focus groups, data was organized and analysed using the information from the notes. Comments and observations were examined for common and repeated elements and themes, and subsequently re-sorted in relation to the categories of the proposed schema of the thesis.

This project only represented the context of diaconal ministry mostly experienced in Manitoba.<sup>4</sup> This study was, in this sense, limited by geography and did not examine regionally differences.

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<sup>4</sup>Several of the participants in the project have had ministry experience in other regions of the country, but the work of all participants at the time of the focus groups was in Manitoba. It should be noted that significant changes have happened within this region's diaconal community in the last decade. In 1991, the first person in many years was commissioned to diaconal ministry in the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario. It had not been since the 1970s that someone had been designated for this stream of ministry. Through most of the 1980s, only a handful of faithful, dedicated women were active diaconal ministers in this Conference. Since 1991, a number of the graduates of the Western-based field program and regional programs of the Centre for Christian Studies have been commissioned in this conference. As well, several diaconal ministers have moved to this conference from other regions of the country. And within this decade, a few diaconal students from the program at Dr. Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre have been commissioned by the All Native Circle Conference and live and work in this geographic region. Also, the 1998 move of the offices of the Centre for Christian Studies to Winnipeg has helped to raise and energize interest in diaconal ministry in Manitoba.

It would be interesting and helpful to test this model with ordained ministers and lay persons; but the first task was to test the model with those who are most experienced in diaconal identity and most affected by the perceptions of the diaconate.

The thesis model for understanding diaconal ministry was circulated to the participants prior to the focus groups. There was danger that some would feel pressured to conform their thoughts to the proposed model or feel compelled to reject the model. It was important that I, as the researcher, facilitate the focus groups in a way that encouraged reflection and openness to new insights. As a white, able-bodied, educated, employed, male it was essential that I be conscious of power and privilege in my person and in my role as researcher. Also, as an ordered minister switching from an ordained to a diaconal stream, it was important to share this situation with the participants so that my commitments and alliances were transparent and open.

At the end of each session focus group participants were asked to evaluate the experience. Comments were very positive. Appreciation was expressed for the disciplined nature of the conversation, that did not digress into chatting, that the task had depth, and that the questions covered the topic well. Gratitude was conveyed for the mutuality of the conversation among the participants and with the researcher. Several thought the small size of the groups helped the sharing. The open-ended questions and the supplementary questions were valued. In several of the groups, the laughter and sense of fun was mentioned positively. Participants suggested that because the experience was grounded in respectful

listening, vulnerability and risking were enabled. The storytelling and sharing were identified as sacred honour and privilege. The leadership of the groups was described as gentle, flexible, empathetic, listening and facilitative.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the misunderstanding and confusion surrounding diaconal ministry. United Church literature offered rich background for this portion of the thesis. The data from the focus groups confirmed the ambiguity, invisibility and confusion around this ministry. The factors that contributed to this misunderstanding are discussed.

The second chapter outlines the United Church tradition of functions for diaconal ministry. Education, service, and pastoral care as delineated in official documents and reports are considered. The focus groups identified ways that the functions were helpful and unhelpful in the task of explaining diaconal ministry. An exploration of the role of diaconal ministers in worship, preaching and the sacraments is also considered.

The third chapter analyses the style and approach of diaconal ministry. While some secondary sources alluded to a diaconal style, this aspect was clarified by the insights of the focus groups. Comments are organized around a list of characteristics that have been used to describe diaconal style.

The fourth chapter explores the concept of perspective in relation to diaconal ministry. When this project first began, the researcher identified perspective as including the ideas of community, marginality, justice orientation and integration. Focus group participants, however, suggested that perspective

needed to include discussions of gift, call, servanthood, history, and considerations around gender. The notion that perspective is an appropriate and constructive addition to the understanding of diaconal ministry is affirmed.

The concluding chapter evaluates and analyses the contribution of this study. The conceptual framework offered in this thesis is confirmed. Perspective adds a useful framework and addition to the style and function understandings of diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministry has much to offer the United Church of Canada, yet it has often been unrecognized, devalued and disregarded. The thesis contributes to the on-going conversation and aims toward clarifying the meaning, position and value of diaconal ministry in the United Church.

## Chapter One

### Identity of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada

Since the formation of The United Church of Canada in 1925, many studies have explored the meaning, structuring and ordering of ministry. Cora Krommenhoek undertook a research project in 1996 for the United Church Division of Ministry Personnel and Education. This project provided a review of the ministry studies and a charting of the major decisions by the General Council regarding ordering of ministry. Her work provided valuable background for the Ministry Study Group in their work from 1997-2000 and their final “Report on Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>1</sup> These recent reports have included reflection upon the place and understanding of diaconal ministry.

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<sup>1</sup>Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, Ministry Together : A Report on Ministry for the Twenty-First Century (Toronto: United Church of Canada, report to 37th General Council, 2000).

A body of literature and scholarship exists regarding the history and position of diaconal ministry in the United Church. Various authors have discussed the on-going issues related to identity and vision. Members of Diakonia of the United Church of Canada (DUCC) and the Committee on Diaconal Ministry (CDM) have also produced resources and statements. Pamphlets and publications from CDM have articulated the concerns and celebrations named in their advocacy work for diaconal ministers and ministry. DUCC, an association of diaconal ministers, developed a statement of belief which highlighted the diaconal dream in a creedal form (Appendix E).

Historical research has also been published on diaconal roots in the United Church of Canada. Diane Haglund described the diaconate prior to church union in her article, "Side Road on the Journey to Autonomy".<sup>2</sup> Nancy Hardy in Called to Serve: A Story of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada, used short biographies of diaconal ministers to offer reflection on the breadth of diaconal experience.<sup>3</sup> Mary Anne MacFarlane advanced a feminist critique and vision in her thesis, A Tale of Handmaidens: History of the Deaconess Order from 1925-64.<sup>4</sup> The Committee on Diaconal Ministry published a resource entitled History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada: 1925-1991, which

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<sup>2</sup>Diane Haglund, "Side Road on the Journey to Autonomy: The Diaconate Prior to Church Union," pp. 228-235 in Women, Work and Worship, editor, Shirley Davy (Toronto: United Church of Canada, Division of Mission in Canada, 1985).

<sup>3</sup>Nancy E. Hardy, Called to Serve: A Story of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Mary Anne MacFarlane, A Tale of Handmaidens: History of the Deaconess Order from 1925-64 (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Master of Arts thesis, 1987).

offered an outline of United Church diaconal history with evocative quotes.<sup>5</sup> These studies outlined the many difficulties and obstacles faced by the diaconate in the United Church, as well as the passionate commitment shown throughout its history. These historical fights for recognition have been part of the communal, marginal, justice and integration perspective diaconal ministers bring to their vocation.

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<sup>5</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada 1925-1991 (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1991).

Passionate commitment has been shown in the articles and papers written by United Church authors who have attempted to bring shape and structure to diaconal identity. Kay Heuer in her project, "So Tell Me Again, What is a Diaconal Minister?" articulated the issues and the challenges faced by the diaconal community.<sup>6</sup> She also conducted a study of diaconal ministers who moved to the ordained stream, Calling or Co-optation?: Revisioning Ministry in the United Church of Canada.<sup>7</sup> She and Teresa Jones placed the diaconate within a feminist framework of empowerment and mutuality in their essay in Gathered By the River: Reflections and Essays of Women Doing Ministry.<sup>8</sup> Betty Marlin emphasized the marginality of diaconal ministry in her work "The Diakonia of the Whole People and The Priesthood of All Believers".<sup>9</sup> In "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry", Eric King evoked the importance of action and reflection while profiling ministries of education, service and pastoral care.<sup>10</sup> These contributions have presented a lively and engaging conversation about the nature and understanding of diaconal ministry. They have pro-actively attempted to address the confusion surrounding

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<sup>6</sup>Kay Heuer, "So Tell Me Again, What Is a Diaconal Minister?" (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, unpublished Doctor in Ministry paper, 1992).

<sup>7</sup>Kay Heuer, Calling or Co-optation?: Revisioning Ministry in the United Church of Canada. (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, Doctor in Ministry dissertation project, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>Kay Heuer and Teresa Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," pp. 112-139 in Gathered By The River: Reflections and Essays of Women Doing Ministry, editor, Gertrude Lebans (Toronto: Artemis Press/United Church Publishing House, 1994).

<sup>9</sup>Betty Marlin, "The Diakonia of the Whole People and The Priesthood of All Believers" (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, unpublished paper, 1994).

<sup>10</sup>Eric King, "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry," pp. 207-213 in Fire and Grace: Stories of History and Vision, editor, Jim Taylor (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2000).

diaconal ministry. They have articulated passions and commitment. These authors have reflected a characteristically diaconal "from the margins" perspective.

United Church of Canada diaconal ministers have acted on the assumption that their ministry is misunderstood. In the church's seventy-fifth anniversary volume, Fire and Grace: Stories of History and Vision, Eric King began his article on diaconal ministry by writing that: "Many members of the United Church know little or nothing about diaconal ministry. For diaconal ministers, invisibility is a continuing problem."<sup>11</sup> A 1985 research questionnaire prepared by Mary Anne MacFarlane had already highlighted this problem. She quoted one of her respondents who wrote, "'Most people, because there are so few of us, know nothing about Diaconal Ministry, and we're always having to start the advocacy and explaining over again.'"<sup>12</sup> Teresa Jones and Kay Heuer began their article, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry" with similar sentiments regarding misunderstanding and invisibility. They pointed to the hostility that many diaconal ministers have felt was directed toward their ministry by stating that diaconal ministry was "sometimes dismissed, often held in suspicion and frequently misunderstood."<sup>13</sup>

The participants in the four focus groups gathered for this project confirmed these perceptions. Participants related stories of being asked "What's diaconal?"

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 207.

<sup>12</sup>Mary Anne MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today" (Toronto: Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Teresa Jones and Kay Heuer, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," p. 112.

One participant indicated that many in church "didn't get it." Another participant felt her settlement charge "didn't have the hottest clue" what diaconal ministry was. Another participant with over twenty years of experience recalled that there has been "lots of confusion and lots of misunderstanding and there is always the need to explain." With patience, understanding and humour, one participant commented "[It is no wonder people are confused.] Diaconal isn't an everyday word. It keeps coming up on my [computer's] spell checker."

Kay Heuer in her paper entitled "So Tell Me Again, What Is a Diaconal Minister?" offered numerous reasons why diaconal ministry needs constant explanation.<sup>14</sup> Her analysis of the confusion has contributed to the understanding of diaconal identity issues in the United Church. In this chapter, the research from the focus groups evaluates and modifies these reasons. As well, further additional reasons suggested in the focus group research will be articulated.

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<sup>14</sup>Kay Heuer, "So Tell Me Again, What Is a Diaconal Minister?" pp. 16-19.

Two of the reasons Heuer stated include the minority status of diaconal ministry and lack of information. The statistics have indicated that only about seven percent of those in the order of ministry in the United Church of Canada are diaconal ministers.<sup>15</sup> This lack of numbers has made the opportunities to experience and model diaconal ministry difficult. Many of the participants in the focus groups lamented the lack of information available. One person had to keep explaining what diaconal ministry was, particularly throughout her training to the presbytery committee who was responsible for monitoring her candidacy for ministry. She stated, "They kept asking 'why not ordained?'. I bet they weren't asking the candidates for ordination 'why not commissioned?'." Many of the participants in the focus groups mentioned that they had never heard of diaconal ministry until they began investigating education and training for ministry. Participants expressed a resigned acceptance that explanation and clarification about the diaconate for congregations and church structures were part and parcel of the role of diaconal ministry. The CDM has undertaken a project of such education for the church networks involved with students and ministry personnel by developing resources and strategies for sharing information and understanding. In a letter to the editor of the spring 2002 newsletter for United Church Diaconal Ministers, Eric Tusz-King wrote on behalf of the CDM, "more than half of the presbytery committees of Education and Students and Pastoral Relations have a

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<sup>15</sup>There are 3,878 ordained ministers listed in the 2001 Year Book of the United Church and 267 diaconal ministers. United Church of Canada, Year Book and Directory 2001 Volume ii -Reports and Directory (Etobicoke: Public Relations and Information Unit, General Council Division of Communication), p. 145.

poor understanding of Diaconal Ministry."<sup>16</sup>

Heuer indicated that some diaconal ministers were unable to separate their diaconal style from individual personality preferences. One participant in the focus groups, who worked in a team setting with an ordained colleague, illustrated the point that it was difficult to separate personal gifts and style from gifts and style for ministry. She felt that the differences identified by members of the congregation between her and her colleague were more about personalities than streams of ministry. And she also had experienced being compared to previous diaconal staff in ways that focussed on personality differences rather than commitments, functions or styles of the diaconate.

Heuer offered another reason for the confusion surrounding diaconal ministry, namely, the United Church's problem in recognizing ministries other than congregational ones. Another reason has been the "behind the scenes" lack of visibility in this ministry. Diaconal ministers have often been engaged in supportive and empowering ministries, like education, pastoral care and outreach. There has not been the public exposure to these ministries that lends legitimacy and justification.

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<sup>16</sup>Eric Tusz-King, "Letter to the Editor," News for and about Diaconal Ministers, Spring 2002, p. 1.

These reasons were supported in the focus groups in stories about employment practices. One participant offered a story about a search process for an outreach ministry where a vacancy had been left by an ordained minister. One presbytery member of the search committee offered that it was most important to "get another ordained minister." There was no recognition of the option for diaconal ministry. Several stories were related about the stress of the settlement process and the inability or unwillingness of the system to consider what diaconal ministry might offer. In one focus group there was a conversation about the power of perception that lent credibility and visibility to "up front" leadership. One person had negotiated, in a team situation, to take on more public leadership as a strategy for raising the profile of her ministry. Another was "sick about worrying about it." She decided she was going to honour within herself, at least, the less public ministries with children and youth and in outreach to which she felt called.

A unique philosophy and status has developed for the diaconate in the United Church. Heuer pointed to these ecumenical differences as another reason for the confusion around diaconal ministry. The diaconate is different in other denominations and in ecumenical circles, this has added to the misunderstanding. Anglicans have been in different places around the importance and understanding of a restored vocational, non-transitional diaconate.<sup>17</sup> The Presbyterians in Canada have been studying the place of the diaconate over the past number of

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<sup>17</sup> Maylanne Maybee, "The State of the Diaconate in the Anglican Church of Canada," pp. 96-109 in A Companion to the Waterloo Declaration: Commentary and Essays on Lutheran-Anglican Relations in Canada, editor, Richard Leggett (Toronto: The Anglican-Lutheran Joint Working Group, 1999).

years and the process of decision-making and changes have contributed to a state of uncertainty and confusion.<sup>18</sup> The Lutherans of the United States have had a complex scenario: two separate orders of consecrated deaconesses and a recently established position of rostered diaconal minister.<sup>19</sup> The United Methodists have had deaconesses, ordained deacons in transition to eldership, and deacons in full connection.<sup>20</sup> One woman from the focus groups told the story about conducting a wedding. When introduced to a Ukrainian Catholic member of the wedding party, the assumption was made that she was the minister's wife. In another story, a Pentecostal pastor could not understand that diaconal ministers were an undermined or misunderstood stream in the order of ministry. In this pastor's denomination the role of the deacon was a respected and valued vocation for the laity. Great variety exists between the churches regarding the diaconate. This ecumenical variety and diversity adds to the confusion.

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<sup>18</sup>Ministry and Church Vocations, "The Diaconal Ministry: A Study Paper for Presbyteries and Sessions" (Toronto: Presbyterian Church of Canada, 2000).

<sup>19</sup>Task Force on the Study of Ministry, Ministry Together for Ministry: Final Report and Recommendations (Chicago: Board of the Division for Ministry, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993).

<sup>20</sup>Section of Deacons and Diaconal Ministries, The Ordained Deacon: Stories Connection Word and Service (Nashville: Division of Ordained Ministry General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Church, nd).

The administration of the sacraments was a heated topic in the focus groups' discussions. One participant recalled a "screaming match" with a worship professor who insisted that only the ordained were allowed to touch the communion elements. She wondered how that upheld the community aspect of communion. In an exchange between participants in another group, one person commented that there are "huge power and control issues around sacraments." Another person responded that she believed that sacraments should be part of ordered ministry; both diaconal and ordained. That led her to the conclusion that one common rite of ordination to a single ministry of the church would be preferable to the present divided state of affairs. Others in her group disagreed. There was much discussion about the connection between the sacraments and diaconal ministry.

There were many illustrations of the confusion that this raised around the validity and purpose of diaconal ministry. Heuer has suggested that the sacraments and the authority given to ordination are reasons for the confusion around diaconal ministry. She argued that the authority to celebrate the sacraments, automatically given to ordained ministers, was a mark of validation. Because diaconal ministers have had to request permission to administer sacraments in many conferences in the United Church this validation is not automatically given.<sup>21</sup> In other words, diaconal ministry is not seen as a real

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<sup>21</sup>A 1982 General Council policy approved the licensing of diaconal ministers for sacraments, for the duration of a pastoral relationship. However, the policy has been interpreted and enacted differently across the church: "in some places licensing is readily agreed to by Presbyteries and Conference, and in other places it is seen as an extraordinary event that only occurs when the situation is extreme." Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, Ministry Together: A Report on Ministry for the Twenty-First Century (Toronto: United Church of Canada, report to 37th General

ministry in many people's eyes because they are not granted sacramental authority routinely. Eric King has commented that although it has become easier for diaconal ministers to obtain this permission for sacraments "it still is resented by some lay people and ordained ministers, who feel that the line between ordained and diaconal ministers is blurred."<sup>22</sup>

In situations where diaconal ministers work in multiple staff teams, the comparisons to ordained colleagues has often been understood as differences in emphases or style. But in many of these situations the diaconal minister was falsely regarded as the assistant minister. Congregations seem to have placed more weight and value on the functions of word and sacrament. One participant told the story of starting a new team by negotiating that she would take the office space traditionally assigned to the senior minister. Her ordained colleague took the less prominent office. Some members of the congregation reacted with anger stating, "how dare she take that office." Again and again, participants in the focus group shared experiences of diaconal ministry being minimized in comparison to ordained ministry. Again and again, they have had to answer the question "when are you going to become a real minister?"

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Council, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>22</sup>Eric King, "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry," p. 211.

Sexism and backlash toward feminism were further reasons identified by Heuer for the devaluing of diaconal ministry. In the United Church, diaconal ministry grew out of the deaconess movement. It has been largely a ministry of women. Throughout this history there has been a legacy of misogyny; salaries were notoriously unjust, membership in the church courts was a decades' long battle, married deaconesses were disjoined from the order.<sup>23</sup> Until the 1960s there were no male diaconal ministers. A male focus group participant suggested that there was a perception that males were ordained and females were diaconal. He felt that this mis-perception accompanied limiting patriarchal assumptions that ordained ministers were leaders and diaconal ministers were nurturers. In a paper summarizing responses to a 1985 survey of diaconal ministers, Mary Anne MacFarlane agreed that society has traditionally rewarded supportive nurture in women and assertive confrontation in men. She drew the conclusion that diaconal ministry often mirrored such societal gender values and expectations:

Diaconal Ministry has, through its history, both conformed to and pushed the edges of society's expectations and limitations for women. In many ways, Diaconal Ministers have been placed in the shadow, under-rated and marginalized by the Church. They have been taught to see themselves as secondary.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada 1925-1991, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today," p. 2.

The women in the focus groups told many stories about sexist stereotypes that trivialized their roles as women in ministry: dress questioned, hair commented upon, secretarial duties expected. Talking about her struggles in a team ministry, one participant stated that it was impossible for her to analyse separately the perspectives of being diaconal and being a woman. Another participant shared the opinion that the stories that ordained women tell are not the same as diaconal women. She recognized that ordained women did experience injustice and she did not want to contribute to a false hierarchy of oppression, but she suggested that the issues of inequity are compounded for diaconal women. In one of the focus groups it was shared that in some First Nations communities, women would not be accepted in ordained ministry. The only option for aboriginal women in ministry, in some northern communities, was to choose the diaconate.

Out of these experiences of sexism, a feminist analysis has evolved in diaconal ministry. In a 1994 article, Heuer and Jones argued that the history of the modern deaconess movement has shaped diaconal ministry with women's experience and out of this history has evolved a feminist vision and practice.<sup>25</sup> The school where the majority of diaconal ministers have taken their training, the Centre for Christian Studies, was a pioneer in offering feminist theology and integrating its insights into the process and content of its educational program.<sup>26</sup> For most of the focus group participants the embracing of feminist critique and ideals was a central

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<sup>25</sup>Heuer and Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," p. 136.

<sup>26</sup>Education Ministry/Diaconal Ministry Task Group, "Educated Ministry: Diaconal Ministry" (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1988), p. 16.

part of their personal story, theology and understanding of diaconal ministry. One participant described her scary and painful experience of accompanying an abused woman despite the vocal and threatening opposition of the abusive partner. She was questioned and challenged, betrayed and abandoned by the church because she took such an action. She felt unsupported and alone. As a feminist, she was being stereotyped and dismissed. And her feminism was being judged alongside and as part of the parcel of her status as a diaconal minister. A reactionary backlash and suspicion toward feminism pervade in the church. Because diaconal ministers have been identified with feminism, through their history, training and commitments, they have been similarly implicated by this backlash. This has been a factor that impedes acceptance of diaconal ministry.

Diakonal ministry has taken an approach to power and leadership that is non-hierarchical, another factor also articulated by Heuer, that added to the confusion around diaconal ministry. Despite the confusion, the members of the focus groups were committed to working in a way that equalized rather than amassed power; that shared leadership rather than operated in "lone ranger" mode; and that stood with the laity rather than performed from a pedestal. There were several comments that the confusion was neither neat nor easy but that it provided opportunity for discussion and an evolving understanding of ministry for all. The advantage of hierarchy and power-over leadership has been its clarity; this kind of leadership has provided a certainty around accountability lines and status and decision-making process and authority. In diaconal ministry, a commitment to sharing leadership and power often has led to lack of clarity. In her

1985 survey, MacFarlane articulated that diaconal ministers have been seen as "strange and threatening" by many in the church.<sup>27</sup> But she saw this as an opportunity because "[t]heir style of ministry works to break down the gulf between lay and order of ministry, and challenges the need for hierarchies in the Church."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today," p. 2.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

Heuer contended yet another reason for the lack of understanding of diaconal ministry: that an openness to un-learn and re-learn assumptions around ministry at an experiential level was required to understand the diaconate. She asserted that understanding diaconal ministry was more than an intellectual exercise. She maintained that an embodied "gut level" conversion and transformation was necessary to revision the traditional approaches related to status, sacraments, and individualism. She argued that the church has resisted this work. Her frustration was evident:

Both personally and institutionally, [the church doesn't] really want to know. Personally, people have a way of warding off what they do not want to know by masking their resistance as 'confusion'. ... Institutionally, to truly accept diaconal ministry means that the church will have to be prepared for a revolution in ministry.<sup>29</sup>

The booklet entitled "Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada", supported this notion: "For the Church to institutionally accept diaconal ministry would mean it would have to adopt a significantly different vision of ministry than it has traditionally."<sup>30</sup> Every participant in the focus groups was able to identify experiences of resistance to diaconal ministry. Stories emerged of being devalued, misunderstood, minimized, overlooked, marginalized and slighted.

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<sup>29</sup>Heuer, "So Tell Me Again, What Is a Diaconal Minister?" p. 19.

<sup>30</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, "Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada" (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1993), p. 4-5.

In addition to the above reasons for confusion regarding diaconal ministry, seven additional factors emerged from the focus groups. Lack of familiarity with the term diaconal was one reason identified for the misunderstanding surrounding this ministry. The term diaconal ministry has only been in use in the United Church for a relatively short time, just over twenty years. There have been other terms and name changes, throughout the seventy-seven year history of the denomination. Those in the Deaconess Order were designated as deaconesses while those employed by the Woman's Missionary Society were named missionaries. Non-ordained male church workers were called certified employed churchmen. When these groups were recognized as members of the Order of Ministry in 1968, the term commissioned was used, even though it never had official status. Only after a set of consultations in the early 1980s was the consensus decision made by the deaconesses, certified churchmen, and commissioned ministers to call themselves diaconal ministers.<sup>31</sup> This plethora of changes and terminology has been confusing to many people, especially for those outside the workings and discussions of larger church structures and committees. Diaconal, a word of Greek derivation, was not part of common parlance. Humorous references were made by focus group participants to people thinking they were in "diagonal" ministry.

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<sup>31</sup>King, "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry," p. 210.

Some confusion has been created by the multiple uses of the term diaconal. A narrow usage of diaconal includes those officially designated diaconal ministers, while a broader usage embraces all those involved in the church's call to service. This confusion was illustrated, for the focus group participants, in many circumstances. For instance, some of those previously commissioned to diaconal ministry have since been ordained to a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care, and some of these folks still consider themselves diaconal. Another example cited related to membership in the diaconal association Diakonia of the United Church of Canada (DUCC). In 1997, it opened its membership to those who consider themselves diaconal, leading those officially categorized as lay, staff associates and ordained into participation in this organization.<sup>32</sup> This was an admirable gesture toward inclusivity but it has also contributed to some of the confusion. As reflected by DUCC membership policy, many of the focus group participants promoted a sharing of the ministry of diaconia with the whole people of God. One focus group participant echoed these sentiments: "The constant re-assessment and defining of diaconal ministry is essential. We are not just a club with closed boundaries." The literature has supported this broad definition of diaconal ministry. Betty Marlin wrote for example, that diaconia is "the ministry of serving, [and] belongs to the whole people."<sup>33</sup> There has been a deliberate

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<sup>32</sup>Minutes of the Diakonia of the United Church of Canada National Gathering, April, 1997, Prairie Christian Training Centre, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup>Marlin, "Ministry in the Twenty First Century: The Diakonia of the Whole People and the Priesthood of All Believers," p. 4.

ambiguity in this approach. The boundaries of diaconal and non-diaconal have not been rigid. This has seemed appropriately welcoming and encouraging of a ministry to which all of the church is called, but has contributed to the confusion regarding the distinctiveness of diaconal ministry.

It has not been easy for many in the church to appreciate the range of vision that was represented in diaconal ministry. As one participant in the focus groups stated, "It is difficult to get neat and easy answers to diaconal ministry. It is open to variables and interpretation of variables. When I am tired I want black and white answers." An openness to diversity has not always been embraced by the church. "Ministry Together: A Report on Ministry for the Twenty-first Century", identified points of tension in current United Church policy and practice regarding categorizing and valuing ministry personnel. Particular confusion was expressed about the differences in role and function between ordained and diaconal ministry and it was noted that often the confusion was expressed as not understanding diaconal ministry.<sup>34</sup> The report indicated that diversity was valued by some. But there were prevailing tensions created by the differences in ministry approach and designation. This inability or unwillingness to embrace diversity has been largely affected by the perception that ordination was the norm for ministry. This attitude and call for consistent homogeneity has contributed to the confusion about diaconal ministry.

Training has been another source of confusion. Most of those in diaconal

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<sup>34</sup>Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, Ministry Together: A Report on Ministry for the Twenty-First Century, p. 10.

ministry have been trained in non-degree granting programs that have presented alternatives to the traditional academic model. Some theological educators and church leaders have been suspicious and devalue diaconal education. One participant in the focus groups said:

There is a lack of understanding of diaconal training. They think we cut out dolls. ... The assumption is that the only way to learn is 'jug and mug' [where] experience is devalued.

Another participant stated that she had been told by an ordained colleague that diaconal training was "Mickey Mouse". Despite such criticisms, diaconal ministers have expressed deep satisfaction with their ministry preparation.<sup>35</sup> The emphases on integration of field work, academic scholarship, and community learning circles are some of the attributes of this education. Diaconal training has included commitment to action and reflection, self-directed learning, mutuality in the teacher-student relationship, critical social analysis and spiritual formation.<sup>36</sup> Most of the participants in the focus groups affirmed their training. The scholastic rigour of the more academic programs was mentioned. Those familiar with First Nations programs applauded the combined training of diaconal and ordained stream students. Those from diaconal-only programs appreciated not being overwhelmed by an ordained majority. The mutual approach to learning and the

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<sup>35</sup>Mary Anne MacFarlane cited the Women in Ministry Research Project of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and her own questionnaire results showing that the vast majority of diaconal ministers surveyed found their educational preparation "extremely valuable" and that they appeared to be "the most satisfied (with their theological training)." MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today", p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>For a discussion of the educational methodology of diaconal preparation refer to: MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today", p. 3 and 4; and King, "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry," p. 211.

challenges to the heart and mind were appreciated in the Centre for Christian Studies (CCS) and Western Based Field Program (WBFP). The intentionality around feedback, life long learning and consultative student-staff relationships were highlighted. There was also critical reflection on the training experiences. There was critique of the lack of field experience in the more academic programs. This was viewed as inadequate preparation for daily ministry. The lack of attention to diaconal formation and history was a concern of the First Nations training. Those who had graduated from CCS and WBFP expressed some concern over the hectic speed of the program, the shallowness of some activities and absence of spirituality. The participants were aware of the poor regard with which their training was appraised by many in the church. One person felt her training program was "bashed" as "second class." Another was aware that the program at CCS was trivialized by its historic nickname, "The Angel Factory." The style and philosophy of diaconal education was perceived to be outside the norm of training for other professional ministers. It was judged to be "less than." This misunderstanding has contributed to the confusion around diaconal ministry.

Several participants in the focus groups expressed their frustration with clericalism. One stated that she was often tempted to challenge the normative assumptions around clerical privilege by asking, "what makes them the centre of the universe?" The influence of the patriarchal legacy of clericalism has been power dynamics, which give "authority and prestige to those who are ordained."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, Ministry Together: A Report on Ministry for the Twenty-First Century, p. 12.

When ordination has been seen as the norm, diaconal ministers have been seen as interlopers. Part of clericalism's power has come from the spiritual authority given to the ordained as representatives of God and the church. The focus group participants indicated that this authority was withheld from diaconal ministers. In addition, many of the participants found such authority a foreign and uncomfortable privilege that they do not want to encourage or accept.

Regional differences exist in the percentages of folks in diaconal ministry.<sup>38</sup> Recently the population of diaconal ministers has been concentrated in Manitoba and Alberta. Regions such as the Atlantic provinces, British Columbia and Quebec have historically had less familiarity with diaconal ministry despite some very high profile persons in church leadership in these areas of the country. Until 1998, southern Ontario had exposure to diaconal ministry through the presence of the Centre for Christian Studies, but, at the present time, the number of diaconal ministers in active ministry, particularly in Toronto, is quite low. In a population such as the sample used for this study, there was a shifting of awareness around diaconal ministry. In Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, the sheer number of diaconal ministers has increased since the advent of regional training programs for diaconal ministry through the Western Based Field Program, the Doctor Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre, and the Centre for Christian Studies. Even with this shift, diaconal ministers have continued to be a minority. The 2002 Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Settlement Committee report indicated 23

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<sup>38</sup>Donna Sinclair, "Ministry behind the Scenes: The Role of Diaconal Ministers in Today's Church" United Church Observer, December, 1991, p. 13.

diaconal ministers and 125 ordained ministers in recognized pastoral charges, church appointed or other special ministries; 5 diaconal ministers and 37 ordained ministers considered retained in non-presbytery oversight ministries; and 3 diaconal ministers and 95 ordained ministers who have retired.<sup>39</sup> Despite the shifting profile and the increased numbers in this region, the resources of the diaconal community have been stretched and awareness has continued to be low. Across the country, the lack of opportunity to engage with or even experience diaconal ministers has been even more acute. The way that diaconal ministry has been experienced in one region cannot be generalized to another region. This has added to the confusion.

A final factor that has affected confusion was a frequently asked question about diaconal ministry, "does the distinction really matter?" In the December 1991 United Church Observer series of articles on diaconal ministry, the question was posed whether diaconal ministry should merge with the ordained stream. Grant Dawson, an ordained minister, made the case for the merger, suggesting that the divisions "do little but confuse lay people and separate those involved in professional ministry?"<sup>40</sup> Ann Naylor, then secretary of the United Church's Women in Ministry office, felt that a merger of the streams of ministry would mean the loss of something valuable:

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<sup>39</sup> Settlement Committee, "Appendix G: Settlement Committee Report," Record of Proceedings: 77th Annual Meeting (Winnipeg: Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, United Church of Canada, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> Grant Dawson, "Two Pathways to the Same Ministry," United Church Observer, December, 1991, p. 17.

The relationship between the two parts of the ordered ministry is a little like the relationship between the [sic] Canada and the U.S. 'If Canada were subsumed by the U.S., tomorrow, we wouldn't die. But our cultural distinctiveness would disappear. To be aware of that is not to be anti-American. In the same way, we are not anti-ordination. But we need to honour the vision that comes out of our heritage.<sup>41</sup>

MacFarlane outlined the biblical tradition and rich history (especially emphasizing the ministry of women) of the diaconate and concluded that the streams should not be homogenized. She stated, "Both traditions of ministry challenge each other, and are essential for a healthy and faithful Christian community."<sup>42</sup> The question about amalgamating the two streams has been asked over and over again. A recent task group commissioned by the 2000 General Council was asked to explore the possibilities of one common rite for ministry. This group wrestled with the question and was unable to recommend such directions.<sup>43</sup> That this question has continued to arise has added to the uncertainty for diaconal ministry. They have worried that their distinctiveness will be "swallowed up" by the normative majority perspective of ordained ministry.

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<sup>41</sup> Sinclair, "Ministry behind the Scenes: The Role of Diaconal Ministers in Today's Church," pp. 12-13.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Anne MacFarlane, "A Difference That Helps Make Us Whole," United Church Observer, December, 1991, pp. 16-17.

<sup>43</sup> Task Group on One Rite of Admission to the Order of Ministry, "Report of the Task Group on One Rite of Admission to the Order of Ministry" (Toronto: Ministry and Employment Policy and Services, The United Church of Canada, October, 2002).

Diaconal ministers are regularly asked to compare themselves to ordained ministers and to explain the distinctions between diaconal and ordained ministry. This kind of dynamic has contributed to an adversarial situation where diaconal ministers have to justify their ministry. The focus group participants identified many instances where ordination was the assumed norm for ministry. One participant wanted to turn the tables and ask, "What makes ordained ministry unique?" Some were frustrated with the situation and resented the continual task of defending and defining diaconal ministry. Several participants were resigned to the fact. One said about the task of defining diaconal ministry, "You can't not reference ordination. It is normative. It shouldn't be. But it is." One participant used ordination to explain her ministry in terms of "this is what I am not." Yet, there was a competitiveness to such scenarios with which most of these diaconal ministers were uncomfortable. One focus group participant described a Women in Ministry event where an ordained woman blew out the worship candles in protest because she felt undervalued and oppressed because she was ordained. The focus group participant thought this state of adversarial competition was really sad and concluded, "What a shame!"

The focus groups reflected on this competition between diaconal and ordained ministries by discussing the tension around diaconal ministers taking positions that have traditionally been perceived to be ordained. One person admitted to feeling equally frustrated when ordained folks took jobs that traditionally seem to fit the training and vocation of the diaconate.

There was also discussion about ordained and diaconal styles and

approaches. Most were not confident or comfortable about attributing labels or affixing stereotypes. Most were ready to celebrate ordained individuals who were willing to embrace mutuality and empowerment as ways of being in ministry. There was acknowledgement that some in the ordained stream chose ordination without much knowledge or exposure to the diaconal option. There was, however, resistance to ordained folks appropriating diaconal style without reflective scrutiny and analysis or without having to live into the marginalization.

Evidence from the focus groups suggests that real differences existed between ordained and diaconal styles and approaches. One participant described the images used by a former teacher:

The ordained stream maintains the status quo. The diaconal stream are 'shit disturbers'. I know ordained people who don't fit that description. But we [diaconal ministers] question what is going on.

Another ventured, "Ordained ministers get offended if we say we start with people, transformation, justice. When diaconal ministers are clear ordained ministers are threatened." In most cases, however, the participants did not want to perpetuate the us and them conflict. The diaconal ministers represented in the focus groups did not want to claim their commitments and perspectives as unique to themselves. They wanted to welcome others into a ministry that stresses justice and transformation, empowerment and compassion. They did not want their ministries to be perceived as a contradiction to ordained ministry. As one participant said, "We don't want to be versus others. It is not a comparison. We are trying to define 'who are we?' not in comparison."

One aspect of the ordained/diaconal tension was the use of the designation

Reverend.<sup>44</sup> This issue arose several times in the focus group discussions. Most of the participants were not comfortable with the entitlement which goes with using "Rev." In many situations they were able to avoid usage. Yet in some contexts (church signage, bulletin inserts, funeral obituaries, pastoral situations, ecumenical circumstances) explanations needed to be made. There was a repeated refrain, "When I try to explain, eyes glaze over." "People don't 'get' why I don't want to use Reverend." Many of the focus group felt this position was not easy to explain. Most were motivated out of an egalitarian desire to stand with, not above, the people. They noted that it was a counter cultural preference.

In some instances the focus group participants indicated that they chose to use the designation for pragmatic reasons. One of the participants, for example, used "Rev." with a signature on a legal document to establish her authenticity and authority. This action was challenged by her legal opponents and there was a sense that this participant was being questioned because she did not "know her place." Others recounted stories in pastoral situations where they did not correct or rebuff the designation when it was ascribed to them. They decided that these moments of grief or crisis were not the right teachable moments. For the most part, participants in the focus groups viewed the designation as problematic. There was a sense that there was distancing associated with use because it was perceived as an elitist title. They expressed concern that it was a symbol of "buying in," or that it may indicate that they are "power grabbing;" they worried

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<sup>44</sup>For a discussion of this issue refer to: Yvonne Stewart, "Question Box: There are No Rules on Who Is Allowed to Be Called 'Reverend'," United Church Observer, September 2001, p. 17.

about losing their identity and integrity. There was a lot of energy in the conversation. There was something symbolic in this issue. For these diaconal ministers there was a pervasive pressure to conform to the expectations of the norm with its attendant affirmation of the status quo and patriarchy. They felt called to resist.

The participants in the focus groups shared many examples that illustrated their sense of anguish and pain about having had to continually explain and justify diaconal ministry. They have felt frustrated and unappreciated. One participant noted:

There has been misunderstanding and devaluing. Diaconal ministry is not valued as a function of ministry. I have always had to explain. In this community people don't know [what diaconal ministry is].

The sense of humiliation and embarrassment was evident in the story related by one participant.

I believe it was the Minister Emeritus [in my home congregation] who put it in my mind that diaconal ministry was 'less than'. I have a sense of shame. I rarely call myself a diaconal minister.

Participants told stories of being demeaned and belittled in ways that felt degrading and insulting. Many echoed the experience of having their preparation for ministry minimized. One person commented, "I have been asked many times 'How much more training do you need to be a real minister?'" Another related an incident that trivialized diaconal work:

[At a Conference committee meeting] I was asked to do the 'diaconal' thing and get the flip chart and markers. It is an abusive misunderstanding. Comments like that are 'put downs.'

Such illustrations offered a glimpse into the resolve and strength that must be

required to face such opposition and undermining. Clearly there was frustration. Along side the frustration was the desire not to be complainers. As one participant said:

There are struggles for sure, but I remain enthusiastic [about diaconal ministry]. I want to make space for folks [in diaconal ministry] to whine and be heard. But I am not happy when we start to glory in victimization.

There was often a willingness to see the gift and possibility in having to explain.

Another participant commented:

I'm starting to look on [the confusion around diaconal ministry] as an opportunity...The misunderstanding opens up the mystery...the unknown quality of ministry. And I can begin exploring with people.

In another focus group, one person expressed delight: "It is a constant conversation [the nature of diaconal ministry]. It's what makes us who we are. We are constantly evolving. And I celebrate that."

The discussion in the secondary literature has supported the dual response of frustration and enthusiasm for the on-going nature of the conversation. Heuer and Jones have stated,

The ongoing need to interpret and thereby justify this ministry, especially to church officials, continues to be a frustrating and a demeaning experience. ... [Yet] The benefit is an evolving intentional interpretation of our role as diaconal ministers.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Heuer and Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," p. 121.

Diaconal ministers are put in demeaning, defensive positions. The need to interpret diaconal ministry continues because of the frustration and confusion that exists. The following two chapters reflect on various models that have been proposed for addressing the confusion. Chapter two explores diaconal ministry as a set of functions in ministry, particularly with regard to education, service and pastoral care. This functional model has been employed by many in the church. Function does offer some clarity but it limits ministry to a series of tasks and procedures. Style is another frequently discussed model that has been used to describe diaconal identity. Chapter three discusses and assesses the various characteristics of diaconal style articulated by the focus group participants. Style offers some pertinent characteristics and ideas for clarifying diaconal identity, yet diaconal ministers are not a homogeneous group and their styles differ from context to context and person to person. Neither can diaconal ministers claim any collection of style elements as uniquely their own. Style, as a model for interpreting diaconal ministry, has limited usefulness, as well. The chapter on diaconal ministry as perspective presents an alternative theoretical account for articulating the essence of the diaconal vision of and contribution to ministry. This model discusses the elements of the diaconal community world view and culture that have shaped the self-understanding of the United Church diaconate. This perspective model offers a positive contribution toward the ongoing evolution in articulating diaconal identity.

## Chapter Two

### Diaconal Ministry as Function

Diaconal ministers explain their vocation using a variety of images. One framework for articulating an understanding of diaconal ministry focuses on the functional roles of this ministry. This chapter begins by briefly outlining the variety of diaconal roles in the biblical record and throughout church history. The United Church officially defines diaconal ministry using three functions: education, service, and pastoral care. The chapter includes a discussion by the focus group participants of each of these three functions. As well, the diaconal role in worship leadership and administration of sacraments is considered as part of this chapter on the functional interpretation of diaconal ministry. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the contribution and limitation of the functional understanding.

*Diakonos* referred to the servant who waited on tables. Jesus used this word to describe his vision of a ministry of service. He did not see this ministry as separate functions in a ministerial job description but as a way of life (Mark 9:35). This way of life involved giving of oneself and empowerment of others. All

believers were called to this way of love and service.<sup>1</sup> The early church shared responsibilities in community. Attempts were made to see that everyone's gifts were honoured and leadership was exercised collectively.<sup>2</sup> As the church evolved, structuring of ministry emerged. The three offices of deacon, presbyter and bishop were established. The definition of these roles was rather loose and often interchangeable depending on contextual needs and regional interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

In the early church, deacons were involved in a variety of ministerial functions. They were responsible for the acts of service, ensuring that the widows and orphans were cared for, and the communal meals were served. They had educational responsibilities, teaching and preparing those to be baptized. They had pastoral duties, visiting the sick, the poor and the imprisoned. They had liturgical obligations, offering blessing. They worked as itinerant missionaries, preaching and evangelising.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the biblical use of the word, *diakonos*, and the debate between scholars refer to Barry Rogerson, "The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity: An Anglican-Lutheran Study: Scripture and Tradition" (Bristol: Anglican Lutheran International Commission, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1983), p. 286; Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God Talk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 207.

<sup>3</sup>Nancy T. Heimer, "Where Did Deacons Originate?" pp. 13-32 in In the Fullness of Time: A History of Women in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), eds., Fran Craddock, Martha Faw, and Nancy Heimer (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1993), p. 8.

An open fluidity initially surrounded the tasks assigned to the three offices. But restrictive forces impeded such fluidity of function and role. By the end of the first century, roles were no longer interchangeable; a hierarchical structure had developed. The episcopacy was at the top of the hierarchy of ministry roles, the presbyterate was in the middle and the diaconate was at the bottom.<sup>5</sup> The vision of shared tasks in the new community was compromised as cultural norms of patriarchal structure were assumed. Women deacons had their authority and role restricted largely to ministry with other women. By the seventh century the office of the diaconate, although not formally abolished, had all but disappeared in the western world.

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<sup>5</sup>Mary Anne MacFarlane, Carol Stevenson Seller, and Dawn Wood, "The History of Diaconal Ministry" (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1987), p. 2.

In the nineteenth century, in the midst of the social upheaval caused by the industrial revolution, there was a revival of the diaconate. In Germany young women were trained for ministries of nursing, teaching and social work at the Kaiserwerth educational centre for deaconesses. The idea quickly spread to other European countries. In 1862 Elizabeth Ferand, the first Anglican deaconess in England, pioneered an order that was closely aligned with the denomination. The tasks in the ministry of the Anglican deaconesses were somewhat different than the German ones. The responsibilities within the British diaconate included congregational work, teaching and evangelistic roles and work with the poor as early social workers. It was this British model that most affected the development of the diaconate in Canada.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1800s, the Church of England started a school for deaconesses in Canada. The Presbyterians and Methodists followed the Anglicans in establishing training centres and deaconess orders. In the early years of church union, amalgamation of the schools in Toronto occurred. The training continued to prepare women for a variety of roles as "pastoral assistants, Christian educators, missionaries, inner city workers, nurses, Church secretaries, home visitors, and heads of orphanages or other church sponsored social agencies."<sup>7</sup>

The expectations were high for the women enrolled in the deaconess schools. Nancy Hardy has described their many and varied responsibilities:

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<sup>6</sup>Kirsten Earl and Caryn Douglas, "A Philanthropic History of the Centre for Christian Studies" (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, unpublished paper, 2002), pp. 2 and 3.

<sup>7</sup>MacFarlane, Stevenson Seller, and Wood, "The History of Diaconal Ministry," p. 4.

They visited the sick, strangers, lonely, bereaved, and troubled; found employment for people; looked after travellers; conducted Sunday schools and clubs for women and children. ... She was to be a consecrated Christian and an excellent housekeeper with a knowledge of music; she was to know the basics of nursing and typing, be able to work as an exceptional teacher and take Sunday services when necessary.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s the breadth and variety of the work continued. Work sites ranged from wealthy uptown congregations to downtown social service, from refugee work to hospital visitation, from education with children to administration with adults, from curriculum development to radio broadcasting.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Nancy Elizabeth Hardy, Called to Serve: A Story of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1985), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>Hardy, p. 16.

Women preparing to be missionaries and those preparing to be deaconesses did their education together. In this period the first steps to include women serving in both capacities under one administrative organization were made. Also in this period a couple of significant reports recommended the formation of a new diaconate to replace the Deaconess Order.<sup>10</sup> Although the recommendation was not acted upon, one of the reports called for the authority to preach and baptise be given to the proposed new order.

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<sup>10</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada 1925-1991 (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1991), pp. 4-6.

Diversity of function continued to be a characteristic of the diaconate in the period between the 1940s and the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Deaconesses were involved in Christian broadcasting, congregational education programs, inner city work, overseas mission, church school curriculum development, hospital chaplaincy, and rural pastoral charge ministry. Hardy suggests that the changing demands of the times reflected the changing focus of diaconal work. The shortage of ordained ministers during the Second World War created the need for congregational pastors. The baby boom of the 1950s increased the demand for Sunday school and Christian education workers. Since the 1970s, the growth in justice awareness and human rights abuse changed the direction and understanding of mission in much of the church's inner city and overseas work. Eric King, like Hardy, suggests that flexibility is one characteristic of diaconal identity seen throughout its history in the United Church. He also proposed that the church of the future will need the gift of diaconal responsiveness and transformative vision.<sup>12</sup>

The diaconate has been characterised by an evolutionary flexibility that has responded to the needs of the times. The specific tasks being performed by diaconal ministers has been dictated by the changing requirements of the church.

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<sup>11</sup> See: Hardy; MacFarlane, Stephenson Seller and Wood; Mary Anne MacFarlane, A Tale of Handmaidens: History of the Deaconess Order from 1925-64 (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Master of Arts thesis, 1987); Committee on Diaconal Ministry, History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada 1925-1991 (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Eric King, "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry," page 212 in Fire and Grace: Stories of History and Vision, editor, Jim Taylor (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2000).

Emergent demands in each generation have re-directed the focus. This sentiment is reflected in the Diakonia of the United Church of Canada's (DUCC) Statement of Belief: "...[D]iaconal ministry remains flexible and responsive to the needs of the church and the world wherever that may lead." It also asserts, "The primary task of diaconal ministry is mutual empowerment through education, service and pastoral care." Education, service and pastoral care are the three functions that officially define diaconal ministry in the United Church and diaconal ministers are commissioned to these specific functions.

Education has always been a part of the diaconal role. The diaconal ministers in the focus groups tended to see their educational role in a broad framework. The teaching aspects of sharing information and imparting tradition were seen as only a part of the work. Teaching and learning, action and reflection were viewed as inseparable processes. The participants in the focus groups valued communal experience and wisdom, encouraged mutual dialogue and participation, and highlighted the lifelong journey of discipleship and learning.

One focus group member saw that a fundamental part of her work as an educator was to encourage people to question, process, and evolve. Another highlighted the role of enabling others to find their voices and giving permission to disagree. Anger was expressed by one group of participants, who wondered why biblical historical criticism had been hidden for years from the laity. "Why didn't they tell us. They lied to us all these years." The point was that these diaconal ministers wanted to "equip the saints" in a non-patronizing, transparent, egalitarian and empowering fashion.

One participant reflected on the minimization of the work of a congregational Christian education worker. Nevertheless, diaconal ministers continue their educational work with Sunday schools, Bible studies, youth groups, confirmation classes, camps and vacation church schools. MacFarlane's 1985 research indicated that education was the second most frequent response given to the question of diaconal uniqueness. She suggested that one way this is understood is within these traditional programs. Diaconal ministers saw themselves as having expertise within an educational specialization. She also suggested that education is seen as a "general orientation or way of functioning in ministry, a way of organizing and carrying out all the tasks of the Church so that learning experiences and growth processes are emphasized."<sup>13</sup> Diaconal ministers did not confine their understanding of education to traditional activities of the Christian education worker. Education was a viewpoint from which they regarded all of their endeavours. In inner city outreach projects they have considered educating the church about poverty and the developing skills for the community to be integral parts of the work. In offering pastoral care they have shared knowledge and sought wisdom and discernment. In leading worship they have seen the opportunities for information sharing and growth.

One focus group participant, who has been connected with outreach ministry, described her work in educational terms. She interpreted the needs and

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<sup>13</sup>Mary Anne MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today" (Toronto: Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1987), page 1.

realities of the non-church poor and encouraged the church to be more compassionate and inclusive. She explained and embodied the spiritual hope and demands of the gospel with the non-church community members. She attempted to educate politicians about the injustice of the social systems. This participant's comments illustrated the difficulty in separating education from service or social ministry work.

Others participants noted the difficulty in separating education from pastoral care. One focus group reflected on the opportunities in crisis situations to deal with questions of meaning and identify the resources that faith and spirituality offer. One participant recalled a death bed conversation where a congregant asked, "Where do you go when you die?" The diaconal minister saw this as a chance to explore belief and questions of eternal life. Her point was that it is often artificial to separate the ministries of education and pastoral care.

Another focus group talked about the educational role in worship and preaching. They felt the sermon provided a forum to help understanding. They concluded that it was a false dichotomy to separate education from worship. Indeed, they found it difficult to highlight education as a separate component of their ministry, because education was integrated throughout their ministry.

Just as education has been upheld as one traditional function of diaconal ministry, so has the function of pastoral care. One focus group participant reflected on the value of pastoral care. She loved visiting elderly women. She saw it as a ministry of "taking them seriously." She found "hugely holy moments" in these encounters, and noted that while one doesn't "get a lot of strokes" for

these connections, it was "still important work."

Diaconal ministers placed high value on pastoral care. The DUCC Statement of Belief reflected this with mention of the work of "support and caring", "dignity and well-being", meeting "immediate needs" and "ministry of accompaniment." One participant saw her model for pastoral care in Jesus who wanted to get to know people and bring the word of good news and hope.

Diaconal ministers view pastoral care as a shared responsibility. Ordained ministers are called to word, sacrament and pastoral care, so diaconal ministers understand that they share pastoral responsibility with ordained ministers. Diaconal ministers also bring an intentional commitment to including lay people in this work. Pastoral care teams and lay visitation groups are seen as possible strategies for initiating and encouraging this work.

Pastoral care is also seen as a ministry that connects education and social justice. Pastoral care involves addressing immediate circumstances and needs of individuals and communities and working to identify and change the sources of hurt. Heuer and Jones noted these connections: "From [the] educational perspective of pastoral care, issues such as incest, spousal assault and addictions are addressed as symptoms of a society needing structural change."<sup>14</sup> One participant echoed this approach. She saw her work with individuals who had experienced abuse and family violence as a healing initiative for her community.

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<sup>14</sup>Kay Heuer and Teresa Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," page 117 in Gathered by the River, editor, Gertrude Lebans (Toronto: Artemis Enterprises/United Church Publishing House, 1994).

She saw it as a ministry of healing that involved pastoral care, social justice, and education. She upheld the image of healing as helpful for explaining diaconal ministry.

The third functional element in the official United Church designation of diaconal ministry, and in the DUCC Statement of Belief, is service. In MacFarlane's 1985 study, service is the third most frequently mentioned essential element of diaconal ministry.<sup>15</sup> This function is seen as a ministry responsive to the needs of the community and world. This vision of service has many facets. In part, diaconal ministers are rejecting a sense of status or position which might get in the way of the ministry of accompaniment and standing with the marginalized and oppressed. In part, diaconal ministers are demonstrating a heartfelt and compassionate openness to pain and suffering. In part, diaconal ministers are committed to helping and enabling healing, dignity and growth. In part, diaconal ministers are exhibiting a willingness to put others first.

Diakonal ministers in the focus groups, however, did not equate service with charity. They did not want to perpetuate a patronizing model of service which had elements of imperialism, colonialism or triumphalism. Diakonal ministers saw the outreach mission of the church in terms of social awareness and working toward justice for all. Heuer declared, "While the root word 'diakonia' is translated 'service', initially in early times, it meant service to the poor and marginalized... it

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<sup>15</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today," page 1.

is the kind of service that attempts to alleviate suffering by societal change."<sup>16</sup> Diaconal ministers have stood within the prophetic tradition by critiquing oppressive systems and structures. One focus group member reflected on the service function of diaconal ministry by saying that she thought the connotation was negative. In her mind, she replaced the word service with advocacy, justice-seeking and right relationship. In another group, a participant confessed that she usually translated the word service into the word justice.

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<sup>16</sup>Kay Heuer, "So Tell Me Again, What is a Diaconal Minister?" (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, unpublished Doctor in Ministry paper, 1992), page 5.

Diaconal ministers challenge the notion that service implies servitude or subservience. MacFarlane quoted one of the respondents to her survey as saying, "Diaconal Ministry involves taking on the role of servant, but a servant who recognizes his/her own worth, a servant who is valuable for him/herself alone."<sup>17</sup> The diaconal ministers in the focus groups did not applaud self-destruction, self-denigration, or poor self-worth. One participant revealed that she disliked the connotation that service was equated with servility and slavery. For her, servant ministry did not require a derogatory self-image. Neither did it require that diaconal ministers be patronized or be perceived as second class.

As with education and pastoral care, service was seen as a function of diaconal ministry that was integrated with the other functions of ministry. One participant commented that she thought her social analysis was integrated in all that she did. It was connected to worship, Bible study, and pastoral care.

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<sup>17</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada Today," page 1.

In the focus groups, there was some sense that the functions of diaconal ministry complement ordained ministry (i.e., education and preaching enhance one another; service balances worship). Others observed that the three-fold functions of education, service, and pastoral care served to distinguish diaconal ministry from ordained ministry in a way that narrows and limits. One participant said that the three-fold functions "slot us in Christian education or outreach." It was agreed that there was some confusion and resentment around the emergence of more diaconal ministers "not sticking to the functions and doing ministries of Word and Sacrament" (as one focus group participant described the situation). One of the dynamics identified in this confusion and resentment was that the differentiation between diaconal and ordained are unclear. Heuer has noted that "[s]ome wonder whether valid distinctions remain."<sup>18</sup>

The United Church itself has contributed to a blurring of the lines between diaconal and ordained ministries in its employment practice. A shortage of ordained personnel in the church, particularly in rural areas, during the last couple of decades, has made it increasingly common for diaconal ministers to be granted licences for administering sacraments and to be in positions of leadership of worship including preaching. In other words, diaconal ministers have been functioning as sole-paid ministers in pastoral charges. Some participants in these focus groups were serving in such positions. The participants observed that such

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<sup>18</sup>Kay Heuer, Calling or Co-optation?: Revisioning Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, Doctorate in Ministry dissertation project, 1999), page 3.

situations resulted in some confusion and resentment. One participant admitted to feeling equally frustrated when ordained folks took jobs that traditionally seem to fit the training and vocation of the diaconate. Participants in the focus groups were well aware of the tensions between the two streams.

Some diaconal ministers felt put on the defensive about their worship leadership and understanding of the sacraments. One described being asked by her settlement charge, "Do you do worship?" The sigh of relief was evident when she explained that she had received training in worship. Others related stories of huge fights with ordained colleagues over sharing the sacraments. There was discussion about being accused of "slipping in the back door." Participants in the focus groups indicated that they had been challenged by some who believe that the distinctiveness of ordained ministry was being compromised by sharing the responsibility of worship and sacraments. Some in the focus groups wanted to challenge the exclusion inherent in this viewpoint. They wondered if it was appropriate to make sacramental privileges exceptional for the diaconate.

The focus groups reflected on the tension that surrounded diaconal ministers taking positions that have traditionally been perceived to be ordained. There was some historical consideration when the focus group participants discussed the leadership in worship that the diaconate had in the early church. There was also recognition that the diaconate had not been given significant liturgical leadership within the Reformed tradition. Nevertheless, the focus groups were uneasy with defining diaconal ministry in negative terms, as in not ordained, not regularly preaching, and not celebrating the sacraments. These

diaconal ministers attempted to interpret the diaconate in positive terms that highlighted the equality and integrity of diaconal ministry.

The 2000 Ministry Study Group asked the question that if diaconal ministry "seeks deliberately to be on and reach out to the margins of church and society, why should the sacramental presence of Christ be excluded?"<sup>19</sup> It raised the objection that this exclusion "leads some church members to regard Diaconal Ministry as a second class form of service not quite as legitimate as ordained ministry."<sup>20</sup> It concluded that "It is time to move beyond this criticism and to promote ordained and diaconal ministry as distinctive but truly parallel forms of ordered ministry."<sup>21</sup>

Most of the focus group participants upheld their responsibility and calling to lead worship. One participant questioned the three functions of education, service, and pastoral care, because they implied that diaconal ministers do not lead worship. Another asked, "if the sacraments are about healing, justice and inclusion, why aren't we doing them?" One participant said simply, "If you do baptism preparation, why wouldn't you do baptism?" One participant, deeply committed to her diaconal identity, defended her commitment to one common rite for the two streams because she felt the sacraments were an integral part of

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<sup>19</sup>Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, Ministry Together: A Report on Ministry for the Twenty-First Century (Toronto, United Church of Canada, report to 37th General Council, 2000), page 25.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

ministry. In a dissenting voice, one participant was reluctant to embrace sacramental privileges because of a critique of infant baptism practices.

The public nature of preaching and worship leadership was discussed at length in the focus groups. One participant said that she never understood herself as having strengths in worship leadership. So in her ministry she spent many years not leading worship and not preaching. But she found herself "invisible" without affirmation and feeling "choked." After hearing this story, one of the participants responded, saying,

If you work with children and youth and in outreach then worship is in small groups, but the Sunday morning worship leader has the power of perception. It is painful that the congregation doesn't consider you a minister unless you lead on Sunday morning.

Participants in the focus groups recognized the credibility and power that accompanies the visibility of preaching and regular worship leadership.

Yet, focus group participants did not want to lead worship for the glory and recognition, or the legitimization of their vocation. They wanted to bring integration and a wholeness of vision to their work. Many saw Sunday morning as an opportunity to educate, touch people pastorally and challenge with the prophetic word. Many upheld the communal nature of the liturgy in their diaconal understanding of worship and preaching. Another participant observed that diaconal ministers tend to take the community context and the congregant's experience as their starting place, rather than the lectionary or abstracted word or faith tradition. The participants also saw a role for diaconal ministers in challenging the idolatry of Sunday morning. The diaconate was seen as a visible

reminder that the church was called to *liturgia* and *diakonia*, worship and work.

Some focus group participants viewed the functional paradigm as a helpful way to interpret diaconal ministry. One explained that she re-configured the three categories within the concept of the word. This way of describing her ministry provided theological grounding and energy. Another participant likened the functions to specializations in teaching or majors in academic study. With this explanation, she felt the functions served a useful purpose as a starting place for interpretation. Some commented that the functions added clarity for those who were linear thinkers.

Yet other participants stated with resignation that they used the functions to explain diaconal ministry only because that is the way the church described it and there was nothing better. Most participants agreed. They were not convinced the functions were beneficial. There was a sense that the functions were confusing and confining. There was reflection on the ambiguity of ministry, "life isn't clear or linear". Underlining the fluidity of the functions, several participants indicated the overlap in worship, education, pastoral care and service. One participant felt limited by the fact that the three functions did not include direct reference to administration, a ministry to which she felt called.

Some participants felt that the functions of diaconal ministry complemented ordained ministry. Diaconal ministers in team with ordained ministers appreciated the way education and preaching enhance one another in the congregation. They confirmed the value of holding in balance the primary responsibility of the ordained in worship with the primary role of the diaconate

regarding outreach in the community. Others were less certain of the complementary nature of the two streams. One participant said the functions "slot us in Christian Education or Outreach" in a way that narrows and limits. One of the issues identified here was the relative valuing placed on the functions. MacFarlane asked a similar question, "Why is preaching the word traditionally given more value and prestige than teaching the Word? Why is doing considered more important than enabling?"<sup>22</sup> The three functions officially ascribed to diaconal ministry - education, service and pastoral care - are devalued. Hence, adherence to a functional understanding of diaconal ministry may only serve to perpetuate the devaluing of diaconal ministry.

Function has demonstrated a limited usefulness in responding to the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding diaconal ministry. It has pointed to some of the areas of ministry where diaconal ministers have felt called and have been employed. The work of education has been and has continued to be a deep commitment of the diaconate. Service, especially when seen from a justice perspective, has been an integrated part of the diaconal vocation. And diaconal ministers have approached their work from the compassionate perspective of pastoral care. These three functions have been the structural bench marks for diaconal ministry in the United Church. They have had some benefits in addressing the confusion and the questions.

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<sup>22</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada Today," page 2.

Nevertheless, the three functions add to the confusion. Others educate, serve and offer pastoral care. Diaconal ministers can not claim these ministry functions as uniquely theirs. Also, diaconal ministers perform other functions, such as providing leadership in worship, preaching, sacraments, and administration. Diaconal ministers work wherever their talents and gifts are needed; they are not confined by the three functions. Defining diaconal identity on the basis of education, service, and pastoral care, therefore, has not been helpful in clarifying the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding diaconal ministry in the United Church.

## Chapter Three

### Diaconal Ministry as Style

In addition to function, style is another way diaconal ministry has been defined. In this chapter, the elements of style identified by focus group participants and in the literature are introduced. Nurturing, enabling and empowering are a first group of characteristics named as diaconal. A growth orientation and commitment to questioning are also described as part of diaconal style. The egalitarian values of inclusive and non-hierarchical approaches are articulated as well in this chapter's exploration of diaconal style. The diaconal commitment to ministries of accompaniment and mutuality are considered, too. As a part of diaconal style, consultation and collegiality are further defining components. Prophetic witness is the last characteristic that is discussed. With each element of style the focus group participants response is discussed.

In preparation for the 1982 national consultation of deaconesses, certified church men and commissioned ministers, Barb Elliott wrote, "Much of the distinctiveness of diaconal/commissioned ministry appears to me to be in its style

and stance. These are what are different as much as what we do."<sup>1</sup> In 1985, Nancy Hardy submitted that the "difference between diaconal and 'word and sacrament' ministers is often characterized by a difference in style."<sup>2</sup> Mary Anne MacFarlane's 1985 survey was in agreement, indicating that "style or process" is one of the aspects mentioned in response to questions about the essence of diaconal ministry.<sup>3</sup> Heuer employed this concept of style throughout her writings in the 1990s: "While gifts and skills can be used in many ways, and functions of ministry can be performed through different methods, a certain approach or *style* of ministry has been adopted by diaconal ministers."<sup>4</sup> The 1993 booklet issued by the Committee on Diaconal Ministry (CDM) stated that diaconal ministers "identify more with a style and vision of ministry than with three particular functions of ministry."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barb Elliott, "Thoughts re: the Validity and Distinctiveness of Diaconal/Commissioned Ministry" (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, unpublished paper for the National Consultation of Deaconesses, Certified Church Men and Commissioned Ministers, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Nancy Elizabeth Hardy, Called to Serve: A Story of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1985), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Anne MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today" (Toronto: Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Kay Heuer, Calling or Co-optation?: Revisioning Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, Doctor in Ministry dissertation project, 1999), page 248; see also Heuer, "So Tell Me Again, What Is a Diaconal Minister?" (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, unpublished Doctorate in Ministry paper, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1993), p. 3.

In the focus groups, however, a certain amount of hostility toward defining diaconal ministry as a style was expressed. One participant indicated that persons in other forms of ministry have embodied the same style and added that style was "less helpful [in defining diaconal ministry] than function." Another participant in the same group also found style to be unhelpful and heard it as a put-down of others. She felt it was offensive, arrogant, presumptuous and disrespectful. She argued that the way one was in ministry changed according to circumstances and context; in her mind, there was no such a thing as a fixed style. Others concurred. One participant disclosed that she never understood references to style. She felt it was unclear and she connected the word with the shallowness of fashion. Yet another participant agreed. She saw the dangers of style becoming a jargon term. One participant, who had been in diaconal ministry a long time, reported that she did not use the term. She suspected it had emerged in more recent history; it had not been a part of her training. A graduate of the 1990s said that the term was used throughout her training, but confessed that she was never sure what it meant.

Some participants in the focus groups nonetheless defended the use of the term style. They were prepared to name characteristics of diaconal style. Even many of those who resisted the word were willing to discuss elements of the diaconal approach or "way of doing things." Included on their list were words such as inclusive, non-hierarchical, invitational, mutual, questioning, co-learning, co-leading, empowering, valuing of all.

This list of characteristics echoed the description of diaconal style in the

literature. For example, MacFarlane's 1985 survey respondents spoke of their style as "nurturing, supportive and enabling."<sup>6</sup> They saw it as growth-oriented and focusing on the development of people of all ages. They talked of "standing with people, of being present, of functioning as both friend and counsellor."<sup>7</sup> The CDM offered the following reflection on how style related to diaconal ministry:

If ministry may be defined as doing God's work of love and justice in the world, then diaconal ministry is to be a catalyst for the involvement of the whole people of the faith community in that work. The style of ministry follows: to walk beside and learn with others, sharing the power of leadership.<sup>8</sup>

Kay Heuer's most recent description of diaconal style referred to a style of leadership involving "consultation, consensus, empowerment, shared power, mutuality, collegiality and non-hierarchy."<sup>9</sup> Although these lists sought to identify the elements of diaconal style, style as a descriptor of diaconal ministry has been vague and confusing. It has been necessary to clarify what is meant by at least some of these terms.

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<sup>6</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today," p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Kay Heuer, Calling or Co-optation?: Revisioning Ministry in the United Church of Canada, p. 248.

MacFarlane's survey respondents suggested that the diaconal style was nurturing and supportive. These words, as such, were not mentioned in the focus groups or in the other literature.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this was due to changes in diaconal style since 1985. Jones and Heuer have described the history of United Church diaconal ministry as an evolution in self-perception. They suggested that diaconal ministers in the 1930s saw themselves in assisting roles, while the diaconal ministers of the 1960s saw themselves in complementary roles with ordained ministers. In the 1990s, they suggested diaconal ministers began to assert a "distinctive perspective within the ministry of the church."<sup>11</sup> This description outlined a transition toward an assertive claiming of diaconal identity. The absence of words related to nurture and support in the focus groups and the recent literature indicate an evolutionary progression. Nurture and support evoke images of warmth and comfort. While these characteristics have been embodied by many diaconal ministers, they are only part of the diaconal vision. In this vision it is important that nurture and support are held in concert with challenge and forthright honesty. The separation of the pastoral and the prophetic is seen as a

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<sup>10</sup>Betty Marlin, working with Donald Messer's contemporary images of Christian ministry, adds nurture to her list, but Marlin is not speaking here of a diaconal style but tasks of ministry. Betty Marlin, "Ministry in the Twenty First Century: The Diakonia of the Whole People and the Priesthood of All Believers" (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, unpublished paper, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Kay Heuer and Teresa Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," p. 122 in Gathered By The River: Reflections and Essays of Women Doing Ministry, editor, Gertrude Lebans (Toronto: Artemis Press/United Church Publishing House, 1994).

false dualism.<sup>12</sup> With the growth in diaconal assertiveness and sense of identity, tender pastoral images like nurture and support tell only half a story. In addition, many diaconal ministers hold a feminist critique of women's prescribed gender roles. This influences a reaction to and rejection of the passiveness or stereotypes of feminine virtues painted with images like nurture and support.<sup>13</sup>

Enabling was another image of diaconal style mentioned in the focus groups. It was also a characteristic mentioned on the lists of diaconal style generated by MacFarlane and Heuer. In her paper, "Ideology, Leadership and Ministry", Heuer delineated three styles of leadership based on ideology: traditional, liberal and radical.<sup>14</sup> The traditional leader desired stability, and offered autocratic expertise and authoritarian hierarchy. The liberal leader longed for reform based on personal growth and individual self-actualization, and offered balanced, democratic leadership. The radical leader worked for transformation, even revolutionary societal change, based on communal empowerment. The enabling style corresponded to the liberal form of leadership.

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<sup>12</sup>For examples of the critique of the dualistic separation of pastoral and prophetic ministry refer to: Walter Brueggemann, "The Transformative Agenda of the Pastoral Office," pp. 161-183 in Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Deiter T. Hessel, Social Ministry (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminister John Knox, revised 1992); Roy Steinhoff Smith, "The Politics of Pastoral Care: An Alternative Politics of Pastoral Care," pp. 141-151 in Pastoral Care and Social Conflict, editors, Pamela D. Couture and Rodney J. Hunter, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Stephen Pattison, A Critique of Pastoral Care (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 82-105.

<sup>13</sup>For discussion of sexist stereotyping see the following publications edited by United Church diaconal ministers: Alyson Huntley, "Made in God's Image: Being All We Can Be," Worldview 10 (1) (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991); Anne Burnham, "Boys and Girls: Being All God Wants Us to Be," World Wind 14 (1) (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991).

<sup>14</sup>Kay Heuer, "Ideology, Leadership Styles and Ministry" (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, unpublished Doctor in Ministry program paper, 1990).

The word enabling frequently was used in tandem with or as a synonym to another element of diaconal style that was named: empowering. The meaning of the two words overlap. Enabling carried aspects of helping, but it was not a helping that did for others. There were elements of gift recognition, leadership development, permission granting, and task facilitation associated with the word. The common social action maxim, "Give hungry people a fish and they eat for a day; teach hungry people how to fish and they eat for a life time" corresponded well with the concept of enabling. Enabling was not a traditional charity concept that maintained the status quo. It was a liberal development strategy for diaconal leadership.

Empowerment, in contrast, was a justice concept. It corresponded to Heuer's radical leadership category because its goal was the equipping of those who are oppressed to take on leadership. Participants in the focus groups used the term empowerment frequently. It was connected to a sharing of power and a theology of liberation. Embedded within the word empowerment was a consciousness of power and its influence on structures and systems. For the participants, empowerment involved a critique which included analysing status and position. Empowerment entailed the responsibility of the sharing of privilege. Empowering process needed to be participatory and encouraging. The diaconal style of empowerment was a consolidation of this critique, responsibility and process.<sup>15</sup> The commitment to empowerment added to the maxim: "Encourage

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<sup>15</sup> Anne Bishop has written about empowerment for community development workers. Bishop, a former student of the Centre for Christian Studies, was shaped and influenced by

hungry people to ask why they are hungry and how they can strategize to end hunger in a world of plenty." This empowering style is reflected in the DUCC Statement of Belief where it was asserted that the "primary task of diaconal ministry is mutual empowerment through education, service and pastoral care."<sup>16</sup>

Diakonal ministers were committed to growth in faith and understanding at personal and communal level. Focus group members reflected this style in their commitment to be life long learners. Education was more than a task. The love of learning - and the need to learn - was a way of being in the world and seeing the world. The openness of this style has had many implications for diaconal ministers. They have tended not to be protectors of the status quo. They have tended not to see faith as the tradition to be imparted or passed on. Rather, they have tended to see faith as a verb within a wisdom-seeking spirituality of curiosity, and have striven to employ process that honours context and experience. They have tended to start with people and story and move into theory and ideas, strategy and action. They have seen life as full of potential lessons. Diaconal ministers have been suspicious of charismatic leadership that calls attention to itself by claiming expert status. They have invited feedback and participation, assuming every person has something to teach them. In her thesis, Debra Schweyer frequently named the passion for growth and love of learning as a mark of diakonia. She suggested that diaconal ministry was an art where one is

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diaconal formation. Her insights on empowerment reflect goals of diaconal ministers. Anne Bishop, Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1994).

<sup>16</sup>see Appendix E.

opened to the world aware of the dangers and rewards and "possibilities for hope and growth and learning."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Debra Schweyer, The Art of Diakonia (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, Master of Theological Studies in Diaconal Ministry thesis, 1999), p. 57.

Another element in diaconal style that was identified was raising questions. One participant in a focus group related the experience of being in a new presbytery. She felt the tension and dis-ease in this new environment. Talking with a family member, she concluded that she needed to raise some questions more publically in order to address her concerns. Her family member asked, "can't you just let it be?" And her response was, "no, I can't." This participant reflected on her diaconal instinct to raise questions, address conflict, challenge unhealthy systems, and push for change. After this story was told, the other group members reflected on this instinct to raise questions. One group participant was not sure that every diaconal minister felt compelled to enter into the change process in the same way. She felt there were diaconal ministers who were quite able to "let it be." Another participant tried to weigh her involvement by asking questions such as, "what will it look like if I do 'let it be'?" There was some agreement that, in the call to push for change, one had to "pick your fights." In another group, one participant suggested that diaconal ministers disturbed the peace for the church and society by raising questions. In response, another participant - who had experience with the international diakonia - commented that the tradition of raising questions was not always part of the diaconal agenda. In many countries this kind of questioning was culturally, politically and theologically discouraged, she observed, stating that the ministry of charitable service was seen as the diaconal role. In contrast, United Church diaconal ministers often felt compelled to ask tough and significant questions. They have often worked with

those in the community and church who have experienced injustice. These diaconal ministers, therefore, have had the experiences, relationships and connections that have evoked questions. In combination with their training, which often equipped and encouraged them to do social analysis, they have been able to raise strategic and important questions.<sup>18</sup>

Diaconal ministers generally have seen that they have a responsibility and calling to challenge injustice by asking questions such as, "Who is benefitting here? Who is left out of this situation?" They have not uniformly, consistently or unrelentingly asked these questions. Much has been at stake in confronting the powers that be and holding them to account. Many have lived into courage and developed a style that works for them. Within diaconal ministry and among individual diaconal ministers, questions have been asked in a variety of ways. The styles have ranged from forthright assertion to invitational dialogue to passive resistance.

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<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of strategic questioning refer to: Fran Peavey, By Life's Grace: Musings on the Essence of Social Change (Philadelphia/Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1994), p. 87-88.

Inclusive was another word used to describe diaconal style by the participants in the focus groups. Although the nature and limitations of inclusivity were discussed, these diaconal ministers maintained a goal of inclusion. Welcoming and hospitality were strongly valued. United Church diaconal minister, Charlotte Caron, reflected on the nature of community and diversity by highlighting the richness of difference. She has suggested that Christianity, to its detriment, has insisted on sameness and "assent to correct beliefs as the only appropriate spiritual expression."<sup>19</sup> She argued for a wider inclusivity in the church and an openness to broader ranges of diverse perspectives, beliefs, life-styles and spiritual practices.

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<sup>19</sup>Charlotte Caron, To Make and Make Again: Feminist Ritual Theology (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 86.

The desire to be inclusive has been a style present in United Church diaconal ministry, but there has been a range of approaches. Writing about inclusive language and sexism, Marjorie Proctor Smith offered the three-fold paradigm: non-sexist, inclusive and emancipatory. Non-sexist language avoided sexist language by avoiding gender-specific terms (e.g. God is God, not He). Inclusive language balanced sexist language by offering alternatives (e.g. God is Mother and Father). Emancipatory language transformed sexist language by going beyond balance to consider the function of language to oppress or set free.<sup>20</sup> The range within Proctor-Smith's model has been reflected in diaconal ministry. There have been times when it was best to be an avoider; when inclusion was practised in private relationships and interactions but attention was not drawn to the barriers of exclusion. There have been times when it was best to embrace a strategy of steady change; when a balance was attempted in recruitment and representation. There have been times to be more confrontational; when radical strategies were adopted to demand systemic change and redress the wrongs of exclusion. As a community committed to the ministry of the whole people of God, the issues of inclusion have been played out at many levels and in many issues for diaconal ministers. This conversation has been important around issues of sexual orientation, gender roles, sexism, ableism, classism, racism, ethnic diversity, and mental health. Diaconal ministers have engaged in lively debate

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<sup>20</sup>Marjorie Proctor Smith, In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 63.

about the limits of community and boundaries of inclusion. They have been conscious of the patronizing limits of tokenism. There has not been easy consensus. There has been, however, a valuing of inclusion, in as much as inclusion ensures safety, compassion, respect, and integrity.

Within the focus groups, there was support for a non-hierarchical style of diaconal ministry. Etymologically, hierarchy means 'holy dominion' and historically, was employed in the Christian church to denote sacred authority. Hierarchy refers to the ordered structuring of persons and values where those at the top are accorded more value than those at the bottom. These gradations of privilege are accompanied by a dishonouring of diversity where superiority and inferiority are attributed to differences.<sup>21</sup> The participants were committed to working with others in an egalitarian fashion. They did not want their membership in the order of ministry to be seen as a privileged status of power over others. They wanted to pay more than lip service to their commitment to the ministry of the whole people of God. They wanted to uphold the ministry of the laity.

Heuer and Jones suggested that the diaconal goal was "to transform the competitive patriarchal model to the feminist mutual non-hierarchical model."<sup>22</sup> The participants ascribed to this vision, however, discussion revealed the difficulties of working toward this goal. Several participants talked about the hesitancy of congregational members to see themselves as the equals with

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<sup>21</sup> See: Marie J. Giblin, "Hierarchy," p. 143 in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, editors, Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminister John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Heuer and Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," p. 13.

diaconal ministers. Some focus group participants mentioned the anxiety produced when attempting to team with laity. Hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation have been firmly entrenched in the mind set of the culture. In United Church congregations, when hierarchies of ministry have been rejected, people often ask with frustration and fear, "who's in charge?" Diaconal ministers are aware of these tensions but most have held to a vision where no one is dominated or subordinated, where differences are respected and where communities live in mutuality and justice. They have pointed to Jesus who ate with the marginalized, who challenged the social order, who reversed the hierarchies. They have indicated that in the early church, leaders did not have higher rank for all the community members shared in authority; it was the responsibility of all to build up the Body of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Marlin, "Ministry in the Twenty First Century: The Diakonia of the Whole People and the Priesthood of All Believers," p. 3.

Perhaps related to the style of non-hierarchical interactions is another word discussed by the focus groups, namely, accompaniment. Participants told poignant stories of the honour and privilege of being with and standing with those in pain. Offering a ministry of listening and presence was a goal for these diaconal ministers. When diaconal ministers have offered this support and comfort to those experiencing violation, suffering and oppression, they simultaneously have engaged in social analysis and identified the connections between the personal and political. Standing with others has called diaconal ministers into further action. While they have been classified as members of the helping profession, diaconal ministers have not had clients, have not kept clinic hours, have not isolated themselves in their offices. While they have had professional training and adhere to professional standards and ethics, they have not maintained the distance of professionalism. For them, diaconal ministry involves a vocational imperative to risk standing in solidarity. As one element in her description of diaconal style, MacFarlane used the phrases "standing with people, of being present."<sup>24</sup> The DUCC Statement of Belief added a bold commitment to those on the margins, "We offer an intentional commitment to stand and be with others on the periphery." The statement also included the phrase, "ministry of accompaniment." The CDM booklet on Diaconal Ministry offered an active description, "The diaconal minister walks beside the people, working with

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<sup>24</sup>MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today" p. 2.

them and learning from them.<sup>25</sup> The risks of accompaniment were named in the focus groups. Diaconal ministers who had risked standing in solidarity with those on the margins shared their experiences of being abandoned, judged and isolated by most of the church. There was a deep sense of betrayal. But there was a defiant determination to "seek justice and resist evil."<sup>26</sup> There was also a deep sense of the grace of the ministry of accompaniment.<sup>27</sup>

In the focus groups for this study, mutuality, and associated concepts like co-learner and co-leader, were words used frequently to describe diaconal style. MacFarlane has included the same observation in her work, citing that diaconal ministers "rarely use the words 'my ministry'. Instead, they speak of mutual ministry, of shared vocation, of collectivity and accountability."<sup>28</sup> Heuer supported this claim, "At times, diaconal ministers report that people they visit viewed them more as a friend than a minister!"<sup>29</sup> As well, Heuer's list of attributes related to diaconal style included mutuality.

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<sup>25</sup> Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> United Church of Canada Creed, General Council, 1968.

<sup>27</sup> Diaconal minister, Aileen Urquhart, along with colleagues Janet Page and Pauline Tiffen, wrote a litany for justice seekers, which reflects these themes of solidarity and accompaniment in The Word on the Street: An Invitation to Community Ministry, editors, Barry Morris, Harvey Stevens, and Aileen Urquhart (Winfield, British Columbia: Wood Lake Books, 1991), p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> MacFarlane, "The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada Today," pp. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Heuer, "So Tell me Again, What is a Diaconal Minister?" p. 5.

Diaconal ministers are aware that mutuality has been discussed in contrast to the concept of boundaries in the feminist community. Carter Heyward's book When Boundaries Betray Us was a theological and ethical reflection based on her personal experience in therapy. In this book she proposed an alternative vision of client/patient relationship where intimate friendship was the norm. Out of a commitment to mutuality and empowerment, Heyward suggested that a rigidity of professional boundaries can be harmful to right relationship. Heyward's proposal involved a nurturing of trust and mutual sharing as an antidote to models of professionalism that promote "power over."<sup>30</sup> This book was controversial in feminist theological and counselling circles. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale edited a collection of responses to Heyward's book entitled Boundary Wars: Intimacy and Distance in Healing Relationships, which included a number of counter arguments. While Karen Lebacqz and Ronald Barton agreed with some of Heyward's points, they outlined a strong objection to the direction she took. They argued that failure to maintain appropriate professional boundaries can be abusive and unethical.<sup>31</sup> Lebacqz and Barton argued that 'power over' and 'mutuality' are not polar opposites. They asserted that boundaries should not just be seen in a negative light. They stressed the need for professionals to recognize the power that they have simply because of their position.

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<sup>30</sup>Carter Heyward, When Boundaries Betray Us (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

<sup>31</sup>Karen Lebacqz and Ronald Barton, "Boundaries, Mutuality, and Professional Ethics," p. 98 in Boundary Wars: Intimacy and Distance in Healing Relationships, editor, Katherine Hancock Ragsdale, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996).

Several publications illustrate the reflection that diaconal ministers have engaged in desiring to balance boundaries and mutuality. Diaconal minister Betty Marlin and colleague Dale Irvine have written a series of principles and guidelines for professional ethics.<sup>32</sup> They offer a number of observations, suggestions and values for operating in ministry, including key elements such as identifying overlapping/dual relationships, accountability, confidentiality, distinctions between socializing and professional connections, implications of abuse policies and laws. Diaconal minister, Aileen Urquhart has reflected on these issues, as well. Urquhart was a staff member at West Broadway Community Ministry. She articulates the lessons learned from requesting a hug from Doris, a member of the community who was a part of the Friendship Club at the ministry:

Theoretically, Doris was free to **not** offer a hug, but --given her circumstances and the power difference between us -- could she have refused had she not wanted to give that hug? I had no intention of harming Doris and the story had a happy outcome. But it taught me to be much more respectful of boundaries.<sup>33</sup>

Diaconal ministers have experienced tensions. Discussion has often been framed as a continuum or a set of polarities: boundaries versus mutuality, power over versus power sharing, professional distance versus intimacy. Some diaconal ministers have tried to frame the discussion in an integrated and holistic, both/and way rather than a segmented and dualistic either/or way. They have

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<sup>32</sup>Betty Marlin and Dale Irvine, "Professional Ethical Guidelines for Ministry" (Conference of Alberta and Northwest, United Church of Canada, unpublished, 1991).

<sup>33</sup>Aileen Urquhart, "I was without joy or laughter," p. 109-110 in The Word on the Street: An Invitation to Community Ministry, editors, Barry Morris, Harvey Stevens, and Aileen Urquhart (Winfield, British Columbia: Wood Lake Books, 1991).

understood that the commitment to mutuality cannot be made lightly.

Diaconal style includes a consultive element. Often diaconal ministers have been committed to being consultative and have employed a style that has invited participation and feedback. Diaconal ministers have faced their own community's controversies with thoughtfulness and care. For example, a particularly important part of the history of United Church diaconal ministry was the two year process that lead to the 1982 consultation of commissioned and diaconal ministers, where consensus decision making was used to resolve major differences. The consultation has been described as a "watershed experience" where people felt cared for and listened to.<sup>34</sup> Consultation and consensus decision making was also used in the controversy and turmoil over a proposal to move the Centre for Christian Studies from Toronto to Winnipeg. A special meeting drew the wider diaconal community into the discussion, using preparation studies, special meetings and national telephone conferencing. Eric King commented, "Although there was not unanimous support [for the move to Winnipeg]...[m]ost of those who could not support the decision still felt heard and continue to support the decision."<sup>35</sup> In DUCC a model of consensus decision making has continued to be used. Diaconal ministers have exhibited a

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<sup>34</sup> Committee on Diaconal Ministry, History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada: 1925-1991 (Toronto: Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, United Church of Canada, 1991), p. 139.

<sup>35</sup> Eric King, "The Spiral of Diaconal Ministry," p. 212-213 in Fire and Grace: Stories of History and Vision, editor, Jim Taylor (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1999).

participatory, consultative style of leadership. They have attempted to involve everyone in the process, not just the vocal few or the majority opinion. They have tried to draw out the silenced or voiceless. They have been committed to attentive listening to the other's point of view. This approach has allowed for conflict to be aired knowing that differences will be heard with an attitude of respect and the minority will be granted a voice.<sup>36</sup>

Collegial collaboration is another element of diaconal style. The focus groups in this study, contained a good deal of discussion about the dynamics of collegial relationships. There was commitment to the collaborative style of being "willing or intentional about working with others." A variety of images surfaced to describe this approach. One participant declared, "I am not a lone ranger." Another said, "I am not a shepherd leading." These diaconal ministers expressed a desire to develop team relationships wherever they were located and in whatever context or situation they found themselves. Some of the conversation concentrated on the collegiality with lay folks. One participant admitted that it can be lonely being the only minister on staff in a pastoral charge. Another was committed to a collegial approach, but confessed that sometimes it would just be easier to "do it yourself." Others discussed the element of lay folks deferring to the minister. Many of the participants had experienced comments from the laity who were reluctant to pick up on the invitation to get involved: "You're paid and

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<sup>36</sup>For a discussion of consensus decision making by a diaconal minister refer to: Mary Anne MacFarlane, editor. "Consensus – An Effective Way to Make Decisions," Exchange Spring 1997, p. 21-25.

trained to this, why would we?" It was one participant's analysis that this deference reflected a reliance and dependence on expertise.

Some of this conversation concentrated on the collegiality with ministry colleagues. One participant commented that she worked hard on teaming. She particularly found it difficult when congregation members, in her multi-staff church, assumed she was the senior minister. She wanted to share the responsibility but, in her mind, because of her personality she was often placed in the decision-making, power role. Others talked about the disappointments when teammates talked about teaming but really wanted to work solo. In a booklet produced by the CDM to help the church in its understanding of diaconal ministry, one frequently asked question was raised: "Do Diaconal Ministers need to work with an ordained minister?"<sup>37</sup> The answer given indicated that diaconal ministers do not have to work in team situations, but that they trained to work at creating a sense of team in whatever situation they find themselves. In materials contained on the national United Church web site, aimed to aid persons discerning their call to ministry, the description of diaconal ministry concluded with this observation, "One significant aspect of this ministry is the cooperative 'team' relationship which is central to the Diaconal Minister's style and identity."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Committee on Diaconal Ministry, You Were Asking: Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> <[www.uccan.org/mpe/diaconal.htm](http://www.uccan.org/mpe/diaconal.htm)>

Evidence of a commitment to prophetic assertiveness was another characteristic of diaconal style reflected in the focus groups. An awareness of the dangers and risks in the prophetic role was a part of the discussions. One participant, who worked in outreach ministry, shared her sense that diaconal ministers were prophetic. She felt they were willing to be "out there" about issues of oppression and liberation. Another participant, who worked in a congregational setting, related her experience of profiling the racist, colonial legacy of residential schools. She was met with anger from her predominantly non-aboriginal congregation. She said that she was committed to re-grouping, analysing her process, providing pastoral care, conducting further educational sessions; but she was not willing to give up confronting and naming the issues of injustice. Yet another participant indicated commitment and vision to changing society, to making it whole and caring. This participant felt that diaconal ministers had to challenge the world and the present structures: "It's not about placating people." The CDM has asserted that diaconal ministers "usually begin with their commitment to justice as the focal point for ministry."<sup>39</sup> As a ministry rooted in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian testament and committed to solidarity with the suffering, being diaconal demanded a "willingness and an ability to face injustice, both inside and outside the Church, to critique

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<sup>39</sup> Committee on Diaconal Ministry, Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada, p. 3.

oppressive structures and to work for social change.<sup>40</sup> At the 1999 gathering of the Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean (DOTAC) Eric King discussed the church's shameful legacy of residential schools and cautioned that the North American diaconate needed to be "cautious and humble in declaring a particular ministry as prophetic." Recognizing that prophetic praxis was an essential element of diaconal style, he advised that humble repentance and apology are needed.<sup>41</sup> Diaconal ministers in the focus groups represented a range of strategies for confronting injustice and oppression. These diaconal ministers tended to operate out of a desire to be respectful and an invitational approach. While they have used discernment to consider their appropriate response in each context and situation, they did not avoid the prophetic responsibility to name injustice or oppression. They did not see avoidance as a viable or faithful option.

Diaconal ministers have attested to the role their education and preparation for ministry has played in developing their style, and to the role the support and accountability of the diaconal community has played in maintaining a commitment to this style. Yet, references to the diaconal style have represented different things to different diaconal ministers. Assumptions have been made about style that have not always been shared. A definite understanding of style has not been, as yet, formed. Some diaconal ministers have suggested the possibility that the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup>Eric King, "Diakonia in North America," *Diakonia: Prophetic Praxis Agir*, editor, Edwin F. Hallenbeck (Providence, Rhode Island: North American Association for the Diaconate, 2002), pp. 97-98.

characteristics of style have been largely a vague notion, more a wish than a reality.

In an attempt to bring clarity to the concept of style, the elements and characteristics of diaconal style identified in the focus groups and in the secondary literature have been named in this chapter. Diaconal style has been characterized by a desire to nurture, enable and empower. Diaconal ministers have referred to their style as growth-oriented and questioning. They have described their commitment to an inclusive, non-hierarchical style. They have said their ministries demonstrate a style of accompaniment and mutuality. They have articulated that they have approached their work with consultation and collegiality. Prophetic voice was another element of the diaconal style that they identified.

These elements have not, however, been definitively agreed to by diaconal ministers. Diaconal ministers have differed in the style they have embodied, and these elements have been understood in a variety of ways. Diaconal ministers have chosen to discern and employ a range of styles depending on context and personality. Sometimes they have extended a nurturing style with a supportive, comforting warmth; sometimes they have offered an enabling leadership development; while at other times they have embraced an empowering concern for the voiceless and disenfranchised. Diaconal ministers have generally demonstrated a commitment to growth and questioning yet, there have been times, individually and collectively, that they have feared change and embraced the status quo. Diaconal ministers have been, by and large, committed to the values of inclusive, non-hierarchical, mutual, consultative, collegial style. Nevertheless, there have been times when this style has been relinquished by diaconal ministers and they took initiative and made expedient, direct decisions. Sometimes diaconal ministers abandoned their dedication to mutuality because they felt in danger of violating appropriate boundaries. Sometimes diaconal ministers have not enacted their prophetic commitment because finite limits of energy and resources have limited their ability to address every injustice. Diaconal ministers have known tensions and ambiguities. Diaconal ministers have not been a homogeneous block and have not exhibited a doctrinaire commitment to style. The characteristics that have comprised diaconal style have

been worthy and powerful, and the qualities represented have testified to a way of being in ministry that is faithful to a vision of justice and compassion, but the diversity in the diaconal community and inconsistency within individuals make style difficult to pinpoint. Furthermore, the characteristics and qualities have never been claimed as unique to diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministers have invited others to embrace this style. Ordained ministers and lay people and persons of many faiths have embodied this style. As a result, identifying diaconal ministry on the basis of style, has a limited value. It does not adequately address the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding diaconal ministry.

## Chapter Four

### Diaconal Ministry as Perspective

While helpful insights have arisen from the concepts of function and style in explaining diaconal ministry, these frameworks have limits. In this chapter, it is argued that perspective offers a better framework for describing and understanding diaconal ministry. Function describes what diaconal ministers do. Style describes the way diaconal ministers do their ministry. Perspective describes the way they see their ministry and the place from which they view the church and world. Perspective offers key perceptions into diaconal identity by articulating the elements of diaconal culture. There are many definitions of culture.<sup>1</sup> Most definitions point to the communal experiences that shape the way that the world is understood and perceived. Culture includes groups one is born into. Culture also includes groups one joins or becomes a part of such as the diaconal community.

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<sup>1</sup>For examples of definitions of culture see: Mediation Services, Conflict and Culture: Training Manual (Winnipeg: Mediation Services, 2002), p. 8.

One participant in the focus groups asserted that diaconal ministers have their "own culture and way of being." She contended that experience and perspective are a part of that culture, saying, "When you know who your people are, it is easier to know who you are." For diaconal ministers, perspective indicates a social location from where they have seen the world. Perspective has a historical element, for diaconal ministers, an inherited legacy of traditions and influences. It has also included a theological position from where they understand the world and make meaning. The social, historical and theological positions have intermingled into an inseparable perspective with several elements and dynamics.

Before this study, perspective has not explicitly been explored as a model for interpreting diaconal ministry in the United Church.<sup>2</sup> This model asserts that the historical and social realities of diaconal ministry have affected diaconal perceptions, interpretations, and responses to the world. The community's experience has significantly influenced diaconal identity. Perspective, as a model of diaconal ministry, offers insight into the shared patterns of behaviour, attitude, and belief within this community. Perspective is a key element in understanding communal diaconal identity.

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<sup>2</sup>In an appendix to her work, Kay Heuer has briefly explored the concept of lenses as a way to understand and interpret diaconal ministry. She articulates six lenses which include function and style. While some connections between the concept of lenses and perspective exist, the model proposed here articulates a different set of elements of perspective than the set Heuer uses to describe the concept of lenses. Furthermore, perspective describes a communal and cultural understanding; the concept of lenses refers to individual self-understanding and interpretation.

The cultural point-of-view and the perceptions that make up diaconal perspective are outlined in this chapter. First, from a theology of call the participants in the focus groups discuss their understanding of ministry where a perspective of gifts and skills is seen as a match for the diaconal vocation. The paradigm of the servant, as a biblical image of the diaconate, is another theological perspective. The vision of justice and societal transformation is explored as an aspect of diaconal political perspective. The diaconal marginalization within the church is a view point that has shaped the diaconate as a political sub-culture within the larger ecclesial culture. Another perspective is the strong desire to work toward integration of self, faith understanding and ministry. Many speak of their connection to the community of diakonia in their church and around the world, as an essential part of diaconal culture. Identification within the history of diaconal ministry throughout the ages, provides an element of diaconal self-understanding, too. Lastly, the reality that the diaconate in the United Church has largely been a woman's ministry has shaped diaconal culture and perspective.

Function, style and perspective need not be mutually exclusive. No clear distinction has demarcated the lines between function, style and perspective. Function overlaps into style and perspective. For example, education is a task, an approach to ministry, and a way of viewing the world. Style incorporates characteristics of function and perspective. For example, a prophetic style is a part of a service function and a justice perspective. Perspective comprises theological and socio-political points of view that shape diaconal self-understanding, hence perspective influences diaconal function, what is done

in ministry, and diaconal style, how ministry is done. In this project, function and style - traditionally the primary modes for describing diaconal ministry - were investigated as concepts deserving concentrated attention. In this chapter, it is suggested that where diaconal ministers have been situated in the world and the place where they have stood in the church and life of faith has affected their self-perception. The identification of these elements of perspective is an essential task in the on-going conversation about the nature of diaconal ministry. Perspective offers a more helpful delineation of diaconal ministry than either function or style.

Participants in the focus groups saw that their skills and gifts were well matched for diaconal ministry. From this viewpoint, the ability and aptitude for tasks, such as, group facilitation, social analysis, and counseling are seen as talents well suited for diaconal ministry. This perspective was shared in comments from the focus groups. One participant stated, for example, that the “[diaconal] stream makes use of my gifts.” This perspective has been closely aligned with the concept of function. Another focus group member shared the sense of being drawn to the work of social outreach with children and the marginalized. She had never heard of diaconal ministry until a friend had been at the Centre for Christian Studies for a year. In hearing about diaconal ministry, she knew that this was what she wanted; this was what she had been looking for. From this perspective, diaconal ministers have seen their talents and abilities as gifts from the creator. Their skills, and the skills of others in the diaconate, have

been seen as a match for the work. They have shared these gifts out of a sense of responsibility. They have wanted to be faithful stewards and to offer back to the community and the world some of what they had received.

Focus group participants offered much reflection on the dynamics of overwork that comes with a vocational perspective within the diaconate. Conversation arose about the pressure to volunteer when working in a volunteer organization like the church. There were comments about the need to prove oneself because of the suspicions surrounding diaconal ministry. There were observations about the church's acceptance of the societal norm that worth was measured in productivity. The lack of permission or encouragement for reflection time was lamented. The seemingly unlimited demands and needs of others was noted. The misunderstanding about the amount of time it took to build relationships and do pastoral care was mentioned. The amount of effort and encouragement it took to train and equip others to take on ministry was cited. The need to establish boundaries was stressed. The danger of burn-out was a worry. The dangers of this perspective included over-commitment, an enmeshed identification of a person's ministry vocation with her or his personhood, an inability to separate self and vocation.

This perspective, however, can be described from a healthy understanding of a theology of call. One focus group participant described how she had thought and prayed about her decision to be commissioned, and shared her conviction that she was "saying 'yes' to God and being said 'yes' to by God, for life. There was no going back." She admitted that she had not always done well in responding to

her call. But, for her, being in ministry was extremely important. Others struggled with their commitment to the church. One participant advised that she would not encourage anyone to go into ministry. With great anguish she shared that she was not sure that she could continue in ministry much longer. "I love the individuals but I can't stand the institution....I learned a hard lesson. The church is not about justice. There is so much hypocrisy. They don't practise what they preach. This sentiment was confirmed by other participants, who voiced a strong critique of the church: the structure was inhumane; ministry with the marginalized was isolated and forgotten; homophobia was ungoverned; the pressure to conform to middle class conventionality was dehumanizing; triumphal imposition of ideas and doctrine continued; involvement in outreach lacked intentionality; the focus on the survival of the institution perpetuated self-absorption; there was little interest in justice.

Nevertheless, most participants held onto images of hope where the church had been at its best. One story involved a conflict where contrasting opinions were not reconciled but where those involved remained in a respectful relationship. Another story about growing acceptance and welcoming of a variety of sexual orientations, demonstrated the church's ability to struggle and develop in its understanding of justice and inclusion. Another participant shared a sense of hopefulness in a church programme that matched suburban congregations with inner city ministries, and saw this as encouraging the church to take the journey to the edges. Participants in the focus groups demonstrated a love-hate relationship with the church. They expressed deep commitment of faith

intermingled with disappointment and tender affection. They disclosed unmet expectations and visions of hope, critical assessments mixed with a sense of blessing. Diaconal ministers have made a commitment to their vocation. They see their ministry from a theology of call and as a response to faith, despite the trials and frustrations of being connected to the church.

Servant ministry is a theological and biblical perspective tied to a sense of self-sacrifice and self-denial. The biblical emphasis on service was central to this perspective. The concept of the suffering servant in the Hebrew scriptures, and the image of the foot-washing servant leader in the Christian scriptures, support this perspective. Participants within the focus groups did not identify servanthood as a strong personal perspective. Indeed, there was negativity about the connotation of the image that reflected the association with servility and slavery discussed earlier in this project. At its best the humble servant perspective encouraged these diaconal ministers to remain open to the pain and suffering of the world and put others first. At its worst the perspective turned servanthood into servitude. The dangers and the possibilities for misunderstanding cause some to want to abandon this traditional perspective. In a keynote address given by Louise Williams (president of DIAKONIA World Federation) at the June 2002 meeting of DOTAC held in Winnipeg, she, too, commented on the dangers of the servanthood model. She distinguished between voluntary servanthood that the privileged can embrace as an option, and involuntary servanthood that many in the world are required to take on because they have no choice. Nevertheless, after identifying some of the cautions she declared a desire to reclaim a spirituality of

servanthood that would help focus diaconal ministry on experiencing the incarnation among the least and the lost.<sup>3</sup>

When servanthood has not been understood as subordination it has been seen as an image that promotes mutuality, especially with the poor and oppressed. Embodied within appreciation of the servanthood perspective was the diaconal ministers' discomfort with and distrust of status. Diaconal ministers have not wanted to be authoritarian and they do not want to be placed on pedestals. Diaconal ministers have wanted respect and acknowledgment but they have not wanted to be given special ranking or recognition because of their vocation. As a traditional understanding of diaconal ministry, servanthood has been a perspective all diaconal ministers have inherited. In the United Church newly commissioned diaconal ministers have commonly been presented with a bowl and towel which symbolizes foot-washing servanthood (John 13: 1-17). In wrestling with this image and its theological viewpoint, some have rejected this understanding of the diaconate while many continue to embrace it.

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<sup>3</sup>Louise Williams, "Claiming Authority" (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, unpublished keynote address, DOTAC Conference, June 2002), p. 3. Williams is not only current president of DIAKONIA but also the Executive Director of Lutheran Deaconess Association, Valparaiso, Indiana.

Diaconal ministers perceive the world and approach their ministry from a standpoint of liberation, justice and transformation. Diaconal minister Debra Schweyer has articulated passion for this perspective as a commitment "to imagining what life could be like if God's justice worked for all people."<sup>4</sup> Evident in this perspective has been the influence of liberation theology. Another United Church diaconal minister, Charlotte Caron, has described liberation theology as a belief that "God is justice, longing for all humanity to know wholeness, liberation, freedom."<sup>5</sup> Diaconal ministers have been committed to a faith that is not merely a spiritual pietism. This theology has examined the power and politics of the world, has been committed to social analysis, and has resisted oppression and poverty. Diaconal ministers have often worked with those who are forgotten and persecuted in the church and in the world. They have not been content with stop gap, bandage solutions. They have wanted action that resulted in change. Aileen Urquhart, a diaconal minister who used to work with a food supplement program for the poor, indicated her impatience with the lack of food security in our society. She demonstrated her need to work on systemic improvements when she said,

I find I get so caught up in the tensions around the issue of food that unless I'm actively working on poking the government to do something better, to create jobs for those who can work, or provide an adequate living wage for

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<sup>4</sup>Debra Schweyer, The Art of Diakonia (Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, Master of Theological Studies in Diaconal Ministry thesis, 1999), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup>Charlotte Caron, Eager for Worship: Theologies, Practices, and Perspectives on Worship in the United Church of Canada (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 2000), pp. 187-188.

those who can't – I would go around the bend. For me, justice-seeking is a really important part of our work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Aileen Urquhart, The Word on the Street: An Invitation to Community Ministry, editors, Barry Morris, Harvey Stevens, and Aileen Urquhart (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991), p. 47.

This liberation theology perspective and its commitment to active political engagement was echoed in the focus groups. One participant said that the commitment to justice was the focus of living faith, in relationships, in the church, and in the world. Others said that a liberative perspective was cornerstone, key, or core. One person commented that she always saw justice linked with liberation and freedom. She interpreted this from a radical position of transformation, not a liberal position of balance and equality. Others demonstrated some cynicism and bitterness about the church's lack of commitment to justice. "It costs so much to speak the truth. And so few want to hear it. Justice is not foundational to the church, but it is to who I am."

Diaconal ministers in the focus groups indicated that they pay a price upholding this perspective. The diaconal literature also indicates that this has traditionally been a cost of diaconal ministry.<sup>7</sup> A work sheet circulated prior to the 1982 Consultation of Commissioned/Diaconal Ministers articulated the risks of rejection, misinterpretation, mistrust, and lack of support for those who attempt to live out of this liberation perspective. It stated, "Those who seek to strike at the causes of hurt, poverty and loneliness... may be overlooked, misunderstood, avoided. Those who are sometimes called to be burden-bearers may grow

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<sup>7</sup>See for example: Kay Heuer and Teresa Jones, "Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry," p. 122 in Gathered By The River: Reflections and Essays of Women Doing Ministry, editor, Gertrude Lebans (Toronto: Artemis Press/United Church Publishing House, 1994) pp.134-136; Betty Marlin, "Ministry in the Twenty First Century: The Diakonia of the Whole People and the Priesthood of All Believers" (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, unpublished paper, 1994), p. 7.

weary, discouraged, resentful, cynical.<sup>8</sup> Diaconal ministers have seen the risks as part of the necessary work of transformation. In a world full of unfairness, the alternate vision of justice and the need for personal and systemic change has been seen as essential. Diaconal ministers have been aware that such changes require learning and conscious-raising and often, have involved fear and resistance. One participant in the focus groups identified that diaconal ministry required an openness to transformation for oneself. Others concurred. One person suggested that transformation was needed in working toward the kingdom. Another linked transformation with justice and liberation; another with healing, both personal and societal. Diaconal ministers have often worked with the powerless inside and outside of the church, and so they have understood the systemic forces that lead to brokenness and exclusion. From this perspective, they have been in a position to see the need in the world for justice and transformation and have brought a desire to be in solidarity with the oppressed and advocate for transformation.

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<sup>8</sup>"The Ministry of Diakonia " (Winnipeg: Centre for Christian Studies, Consultation of Commissioned/ Diaconal Ministers worksheet, 1982).

Diaconal ministers have the perspective of being on the margins of the church. Despite the polity that has prescribed equality within the order of ministry, they have been considered lower or second class, perceived as not essential, or seen as a threat. They have needed to advocate for their ministries. They have experienced attacks on their ministry as attempts to silence them or divide and conquer the community. All of this lack of respect has, at times, generated a defensive, adversarial posture. One participant in the focus groups commented on the constant re-assessment and re-defining that was involved in keeping diaconal ministry on the margins. She said it was like "re-visiting chaos." She passionately wanted to lash back from a place of frustration, "Just let us do our ministry...This is the place I call home. I gotta fight. It's tiring. I don't know where to advocate." Many commented on the difficulty and loneliness of being on the margins. It was not a comfortable place. One person observed that the situation can "suck energy and lead to fortress mentality, which is not what diaconal ministry is about." One participant wondered how diaconal ministers were prepared for marginality; how they coped with the backlash and the cost of this discipleship.

This perspective from the margins has, at the same time, provided creative, challenging and exciting opportunity. It has enabled diaconal ministers to name their own experience of oppression and make connections between their own stories and the stories of others on the margins of society. Diaconal ministers have been able to critique and analyze power, privilege and hierarchy from an

embodied marginal perspective. One participant declared that it was frustrating to be on the margins but that it was an advantage: "When you are treated as invisible, it means you can do stuff you wouldn't get away with if you were more visible. If diaconal ministry were recognized more fully, in some ways we would lose something." Another participant suggested that being a diaconal minister helped her to see and understand that the systems were not mutual: "You have to be on the margin to articulate the vision." The work was described as widening the circle. Diaconal ministers have worked to include those outside the circle. The unemployed, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered communities, the deaf community, survivors of abuse were some of the examples given. One participant declared that to be a Christian was to be involved on the margins in a place where we are called to walk in a different way than the world.

This marginal perspective has entailed a dilemma for diaconal ministers. They have worked to claim a rightful respect for their ministry. This has been an effort toward justice. They have claimed that it is difficult to function in ministry without authority. Yet when they have claimed or have been granted this authority it has carried with it a certain amount of power and privilege. The focus groups discussed the difficulty of staying on the margins, especially in congregations where the people are mostly privileged Canadians. One person expressed the temptation, "It is easier to drop into the middle. Many were worried about being co-opted. One person summed up the dilemma by stating that it was difficult to find balance "with one foot in the centre and one foot in the middle."

One participant commented that being on the margins was not something that has normally been affirmed. She was making the point that being a victim of poor bashing or racist discrimination has not been experienced as positive. She wondered why being a victim of diaconal mistreatment was seen as positive by some. In response, her focus group made a distinction between encouraging marginalization and identifying with it. Being marginalized has been a dilemma for diaconal ministers; it has included the pain and experience of being invisible and overlooked. This aspect of marginalization was not encouraged by the focus groups. Nevertheless, being marginalized has also been a gift for diaconal ministers; it has helped them to see the world, to some extent, from the faithful vision of those on the underside. This was the identification aspect of marginalization that the focus group saw as a benefit of diaconal perspective.

Commitment to integration was another perspective from which diaconal ministers operated. Focus group members were passionate in their commitment to a ministry that brought head, heart, and spirit together. Particularly important to a number of the participants was a spirituality that was not segregated into specific disciplines like prayer or meditation. They affirmed a spirituality in all places and actions. They were devoted to asking the spirit into every conversation and interaction. One participant said that integration was her aim. She had a hope of nurturing a holistic vision of justice, spirituality, and community. The diaconal ministers in the focus groups attempted to take seriously both individual needs and societal analysis, the personal and the political. One focus group participant

described this notion in terms of trying to have a ministry with both depth and breadth. These diaconal ministers found it difficult and undesirable to separate the traditional ministries of education, service and pastoral care. This was one of the main critiques of the functional understanding of diaconal ministry. One focus group participant suggested that trying to separate the three functions was like trying to pull a braid apart - they were so closely interwoven it was difficult, if not impossible, to do. One participant who works in a congregation, indicated that the need to be involved in many functions brought a sense of wholeness and integration. Participation in worship was seen as an extension of diaconal ministry.

These diaconal ministers were involved in the church and world, but they did not separate their understanding into sacred and secular. The image of the diaconate as a bridge between the church and the world has not often been mentioned in the United Church. In other denominations this image has been stressed. Thalia Johnson, an Episcopalian from the North American Association for the Diaconate, has offered that the first task of the diaconate was to serve as "a bridge between the church and the larger community.<sup>9</sup> In this role, diaconal ministers acted as go-between bringing the concerns of the world to the attention of the church and the resources of the faith to the world. This image of the deacon as the connector between church and world has challenged the churches patterns of institutionalization, self perseveration and spiritual isolation. It has been the

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<sup>9</sup>Thalia Johnson, "The Role of Deacons in the Church," Diakoneo, Lent 2002, p. 2.

work of the diaconate to remind the church to be involved in a broken, hurting world.

An ironic and inherent dualism, of world and church, has existed in this image, however. The separation of church and world has unconsciously promoted lives separated into Sunday and the rest of the week, piety and practice, spiritual and physical, sacred and secular. While the bridge image was one that attempted to span church and world, it has not encouraged wholeness and integration.

Educational preparation for diaconal ministry was identified as a key factor in establishing the expectation for and understanding of integration in ministry. Focus group members praised their training that stressed the integrity of the practical and theoretical. Coinciding field placements, academic courses and community learning were positive elements of their education. Many were pleased that scriptural, theological, theoretical and ministrial skills were developed concurrently. One participant connected the call to integration and wholeness with on-going life-long learning. Another participant stated, "all of ministry should be shaped by the call to integration." Another group member responded, "If you're not doing integration, what is the point?"

Many diaconal ministers have had a communal perspective. Community has been valued because it has offered a positive sense of belonging and connection. Most of the focus group participants valued the supportive networking and interdependent association. They felt that ideas were sparked

and thinking was stimulated in such communal settings. In diaconal community gatherings, attempts were made to ensure that gifts were honoured. Diaconal ministers have preferred to work collaboratively because of the potential to gain greater clarity and new insights in a shared environment. With the inevitable sorting out of individual and collective needs, community also has meant that more voices have to be heard. Working in community has provided accountability and a place to check perceptions through shared dialogue, critique and reflection.

The diaconal preparation for ministry influenced and shaped the diaconal commitment to community. Throughout the history of theological education for diaconal ministers in the United Church, community formation has been an essential element. Some diaconal ministers in the focus groups regretted that they turned down the opportunities to meet with diaconal organizations in their training. They wished that they had picked up on the chance to immerse themselves in the lives and history of diaconal ministers who had gone before them.

One focus group member said, “We don’t gather enough as diaconal ministers.” It was her belief that there was loneliness in having one foot on the margins and one foot in the centre. “We don’t belong in either place.” She felt the need for community. Others added that community was a place to “say what you need to say” and check out, “Am I crazy?” A sense of being supported was expressed: “people are willing to walk with you personally and professionally.”

Others experienced a sense of accountability, even when the community

was not gathered. Several participants felt responsible to use a style congruent with the diaconal vision. They expected that other diaconal ministers would call them on their behaviour if their actions did not fit the vision.

Not all participants experienced a sense of connection with the diaconal community, however. One woman described her deliberate decision not to connect with the diaconal community, because she did not want to be put in a diaconal box. In reflection she realized that she had been ostracized. Another person recounted an experience of being particularly depressed and overwhelmed. In reaching out for support and direction, this person did not call on the diaconal community. For this person, the diaconal community was not a safe place to be honest or to rage. There was sadness about the promise of support not fulfilled.

Other participants were able to share powerful stories of connection and support. One person recalled arriving in a new part of the country after commissioning and being embraced by the diaconal women who had a deep understanding of their vocation, a rich spirituality, a healthy respect for the church and a profound appreciation of life. Another person echoed this experience. She said they knew the rhythm of connection and community, welcome and hospitality: "I would have crawled into a hole and died. Diaconal ministers kept me going. I knew through them that I was connected." A moving story was told of a diaconal minister's funeral. The nieces and nephews of the deceased filled one side of the church; the diaconal colleagues filled the other side. There was an

affirmation that these diaconal colleagues were brothers and sisters of the woman who died. Others told strong and supportive stories of the regular meetings with diaconal ministers. They were the kind of gatherings that one made the effort to attend despite geographic distance and busy schedules. One participant reflected that she took the time and opportunity to meet when she could, but even when she could not, “knowing there is a network; there is something reassuring and comforting in that.”

Some participants commented on official United Church diaconal gatherings. In a situation where the conflict in the diaconal community threatened to be divisive, the 1982 consultation was remembered positively as a time of respectful decision making. The 1998 discussion concerning the Centre for Christian Studies move to Winnipeg was remembered less positively. It was agreed that it was a less than perfect process that left some in the community alienated and hurt. One participant suggested that there was necessarily less connection the farther away one was from the local community. This participant felt no link with the international organizations. While he had attended a couple of national DUCC meetings, he felt more affinity with other non-diaconal national organizations. Yet locally, this participant saw the diaconal connection as crucial.

The experience of the participants with diaconal organizations outside of the United Church was limited. One participant, who had worked with the World Council of Churches, described the powerful sense of connection she felt with a deaconess from the Caribbean. This participant had felt immediately like they

were sisters. Several participants said that they had only vague ideas regarding the diaconate internationally or in other denominations in Canada. One participant reminded her group that diakonia went way beyond the United Church and that the picture was too small if it was just limited to the United Church. There was a sense that the international and interdenominational scene represented a diverse understanding and structuring of the diaconate. Participants understood that there was a continuum from orders of sisters to rostered ministers. One person who had attended an international gathering thought that the United Church diaconate was perceived as a very progressive, forward edge of the continuum. Participants felt that this continuum represented a diversity that was healthy. They agreed that there was an energy around the honouring of different gifts and understanding.

The community of diakonia, in the minds of the focus group participants, was not limited to those who are commissioned to diaconal ministry. One participant described her discovery of diakonia in a gathering of outreach workers. Her sense was that the work of diaconal ministry was not necessarily confined to those in the order of ministry. To her it was a question of including all those committed to the work and the perspective of justice.

Evidence suggested that the task of doing diaconal ministry included community building. One participant said that whether she was working in the congregation, on a larger church committee, or in a local outreach agency, she saw it as her responsibility to help develop relationships and connections. In her

words, community development was what she has always done and what she was called to do. Although there was a varied sense of connection to the diaconal community, the commitment to community building was a perspective and value expressed by the diaconal ministers in the focus groups.

Many of the participants in the focus groups saw diaconal history as another perspective from which they operated. They valued the sense of being connected to a long history. There was a sense of being grounded in something with long-term and lasting meaning. This was not a temporary, "fly by night" or trendy, "flavour of the month" ministry. The ability to survive despite the obstacles was hopeful and re-assuring. These historical roots were seen as a common thread that offered a sense of pride in their ministry. On the other hand, at least one participant said that the history did not inform her ministry. To her, the history was remote. A couple of participants raised questions about the relevancy of the history. Others expressed a vague sense of questioning. They thought that they did not know their history very well. Biblical history was important to some. One person insisted that diaconal history did not start with the church but had roots in the Hebrew tradition. She took hope from the Jewish stories of mid-wives and those who took care of the widows and orphans. Another participant appreciated the Christian scriptures' record where the diaconate was not seen as second class. This record helped to validate this person in ministry. Some mentioned the history of the Beguines. One person valued the vision and perspective of these medieval communities, saying that she wanted to be a part of this kind of work.

Another person described these communities as outrageous for their times. She treasured knowing that there have always been people at the edge of the church. Yet some participants recalled the deaconesses. Most knew there was embarrassment surrounding the caricature of the white-gloved, tea serving assistant to the male minister. Most admitted the imperialistic colonialism that was a part of the Woman's Missionary Society. But most were willing to grant respect to these ministries, to see the hospitality and support in the tea served and to uphold the commitment and courage of the missionaries. The participants were not willing to trivialize the depth of faith and richness of ministry that was represented in these women.

One participant shared her fear that diaconal history was always in danger of being pushed aside: "The mainstream keeps eradicating the story." This participant shared her passion that diaconal history within the United Church not be denied. One moment in United Church history that was important to many of the participants was the 1982 consultation about commissioned and diaconal ministry. Several participants talked about the battle involved in shaping their own history and determining their own name. There was particular homage paid to the honest "working through" within the community. One participant commented that she had mixed feelings about the name change from deaconess to diaconal minister that was made at this consultation. She realized that deaconess had negative connotations but there were feelings of loss. In addition, the term, diaconal minister had no history. As a deaconess she had not often had

to explain herself. Another participant saw this as a positive compromise, in that it embraced something completely new while it maintained connection to the historical roots and international movement.

One focus group discussed diaconal ministers who had been personal and vocational mentors. There was a great deal of affection and honour ascribed to these role models who shaped and guided with warmth, dedication, vision, defiance, energy and depth of spirituality. A rich and important heritage throughout church history and in the history of the United Church has existed for the diaconate. Diaconal ministers varied in their appreciation and knowledge of this story, nevertheless this history has shaped their perspective and the place of diaconia in the United Church.

Grounded in and formed from the deaconess movement, the history of diaconal ministry within the United Church is largely a history of women. Diaconal ministry has suffered from sexism where men's contribution was given much higher value than women's. The diaconate in the United Church has suffered a demeaning history that has included being barred from membership in church courts until 1964, being denied equal salaries until 1977, and being ignored in the church's studies of ministry over several decades.<sup>10</sup> The roles that women have historically been encouraged to accept and play have been based on sexist

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<sup>10</sup>See: Mary Anne MacFarlane, A Tale of Handmaidens: History of the Deaconess Order from 1925-64 (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Master of Arts thesis, 1987); Committee on Diaconal Ministry, History of Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada 1925-1991(Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1991).

assumptions, and gender has been constructed by societal expectations. Many have had to ask, with Elliott and Marlin, “Is it because we are primarily women or is it because the call to education, service and pastoral care is a lesser call?”<sup>11</sup> In that diaconal ministry has been largely a women’s ministry, it has been subject to these sexist assumptions and this social construction of gender. The role expectations for diaconal ministers and ordained ministers have corresponded to the role expectations for women and men. Supportive and nurturing roles, which have been seen as appropriate for women, have been affirmed in diaconal ministry; confrontative and assertive roles, which have been considered men’s appropriate traits, have not been affirmed in diaconal ministry. Behind the scenes, private roles have been defined as women’s place and correspond to the expectations placed on diaconal ministry, while up-front, public roles have been defined as men’s place; and traditionally diaconal ministers have not been included in these places.

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<sup>11</sup>Barbara Elliott and Betty Marlin, “Servant or Subserviant” unpublished paper, quoted in Kay Heuer and Teresa Jones, “Diaconal Ministry as a Feminist Model of Ministry,” pp. 126-127 in Gathered by the River: Reflections and Essays of Women Doing Ministry, editor, Gertrude Lebans (Toronto: Artemis Enterprises, United Church Publishing House, 1994).

Many of the female participants in the focus groups sensed that gender injustice was a given part of their lives. It was difficult for them to distinguish the differences between sexism and discrimination on the basis of being a diaconal minister. Since the 1970s, women in diaconal ministry have often embraced feminist analysis in their lives and ministries.<sup>12</sup> For most of the diaconal ministers in the focus groups there were multiple implications. In their social analysis they listened for the presence of women's voices. In their educational philosophy they asserted the rights of everyone to participate, particularly in situations where men have dominated conversation. Their theological critique questioned the absence of female scholars. Their biblical hermeneutic included a suspicion of male written and selected canon. Their pastoral awareness included the experiences of women in giving birth, being targets of violence, experiencing menstruation. In their liturgical practices they insisted on inclusive language. They actively critiqued the practice of ministry and theology based on patriarchy; and they envisioned an ongoing creative reconstruction of ministry and theology based on feminist insights. This has not been without pain, anger, backlash and faltering steps. Yet these members of the diaconate in the United Church, to a large extent, embraced this feminist perspective.

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<sup>12</sup>Heuer and Jones, pp. 112-114.

Diaconal ministers in the United Church understand and explain their ministries from a variety of perspectives. Diaconal ministry is perceived to be both a way to share God given gifts, and to respond to a sense of call. The biblical and traditional image of servanthood continues to influence diaconal theology and world view. Diaconal ministers see the world through a theology of liberation and a vision of justice. Diaconal ministers' marginalization within the church provides a distinct perspective from the edges. The desire to work toward integration of person and profession, head and heart, action and reflection is a part of diaconal culture. The diaconal perspective is shaped by a connection to the community of diakonia locally, nationally, ecumenically and internationally. The history of the diaconate provides a sense of identity and rootedness. In the United Church, diaconal ministry has been largely women's ministry and this influences self-understanding and social position.

Even though the individual connection to each of these perspectives varies, these perspectives shape the self-understanding of each diaconal minister. These perspectival elements constitute the influence of communal diaconal culture. The elements of perspective provide insight into the collective diaconal identity. These elements describe the shared experiences, knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, roles, concepts that shape the way the world is understood for this group of people. The collection of perspective elements constitutes an expression of the inherited and evolving diaconal world view.

As an alternative to the traditional understandings of diaconal ministry,

based on function and style, perspective offers depth and clarity. Function is limited because it narrows diaconal ministry to a set of tasks. In a vocation where overlap and integration of skills and processes are inevitable and desirable the limiting nature of function has not been beneficial. Style is unsatisfactory as a definition because it carries a certain elusive vagueness in its variability and contextual application. Neither style nor function are uniquely the domain of diaconal ministers. Neither style nor function satisfactorily represent the breadth and depth of the distinct world view which is the gift of diaconal ministry. Perspective, however, extends a set of elements that bring particular shape and coherence to the understanding of diaconal ministry. The culture of diaconal ministry is determined by the theological understandings of gift and call and service. The viewpoint of diaconal ministers is informed by their experience of marginalization, commitment to justice and dedication to integration. Their community and history, particularly as a women's ministry, shapes their identity. Diaconal ministers see the world and the church from these perspectives, and it is these viewpoints that have given their ministry its particular culture, identity and definition.

## **Conclusion**

This project offers a new model for understanding diaconal ministry within The United Church of Canada. The model suggests that perspective is a helpful alternative and addition to the function and style understandings which have been used to explain diaconal ministry.

The study involved directed discussion in focus groups with twelve diaconal ministers as participants. In this structured setting, the participants related their experiences and understandings of diaconal ministry. The poignancy of the stories and reflections revealed a deep passion for the diaconal vocation, despite the struggles and obstacles that these diaconal ministers had faced.

The experiences and comments of the focus group participants were compared and contrasted with findings and interpretations contained in secondary literature. This project was indebted to the insights and work of these authors and built upon their findings and conclusions.

The misunderstanding of diaconal ministry in the United Church was examined. This confusion caused anguish, hurt and anger among the participants in the focus groups. They exhibited a range of responses from defensive hurt to righteous anger to resigned acceptance to excited sense of defiance. The factors that perpetuate the misunderstanding were analyzed. Kay Heuer's articulation of

the reasons for confusion surrounding diaconal ministry provided an initial frame work for analyzing this issue. The project confirmed much of her analysis and has advanced the discussion by articulating additional factors that influence the confusion.

The participants in these focus groups held together both the pain and opportunity of this multi-faceted confusion. These diaconal ministers were able to identify the frustration and hurt, and the very concrete circumstances and factors that deny diaconal ministry its due. They were also able to name an excitement and enthusiasm about the evolutionary aspect of diaconal identity. The uncertainty has required on-going openness to the process of learning, re-naming and re-forming as diaconal ministers. This was seen as an appropriate embracing and acknowledgement of the world's and the church's ever-changing context and as a faithful response to the journey of life. The confusion surrounding diaconal ministry in the United Church has demanded constant explanation and interpretation. This project has contributed to this evolving dialogue by suggesting and testing a new model for explaining and interpreting the diaconate in the United Church. Two conventional constructs - function and style - were examined, and a new construct - perspective - was proposed.

The functions of diaconal ministry have been identified in United Church polity as education, service and pastoral care. Function as a model for articulating diaconal identity has been previously critiqued throughout the literature. The focus group participants in this project confirmed that critique. By articulating the historical variety in function, the overlap in tasks, and the blurring of

employment practices, this project gathered together the elements of this critique. This project discussed each of the traditional functions - education, service, and pastoral care - and articulated the integrative diaconal approach to each of these areas. Although not a traditional or designated function of United Church diaconal ministers, the function of worship leadership and diaconal celebration of the sacraments was discussed by the focus group participants. The result of these discussions was a declaration of the limited usefulness of function in the task of interpreting diaconal ministry. Function has been a helpful place to start because the church has categorized certain work as diaconal. But in many ways it has reduced the diaconate and the ministry to a job description. It has missed the breadth of relationships, theology, spirituality, and commitments that make up a journey of faith and a vocation of ministry. In highlighting tasks or functions, undue value has been placed on performance and productivity in ministry over presence and reflection. Furthermore, the three United Church functions have not been in line with many ecumenical interpretations which focus on other tasks. And the flexible evolutionary quality of diaconal ministry, which is open to respond to the needs of the church and world, has been compromised by the limits of three prescribed functions.

In this study, the style understanding of diaconal ministry was also considered. For some participants in the focus groups, style has been seen as a trendy, fashionable affectation. For others, diaconal style encompassed a rich set of meanings and values. Style as a model for identifying diaconal distinctiveness has been emphasized in the literature. This project has contributed a compilation

and discussion of the characteristics of style while questioning the value of such a model. The elements of diaconal style have represented a vision of right relationship for many in diaconal ministry. Yet few diaconal ministers have wanted these components of style to become unquestioned idols. Within each element there has been a certain ambiguity and range of appropriate application demonstrated. Within each context of ministry wrestling with wisdom and discerning choices in style was named as important. Furthermore the elements of style identified in this study have not been the exclusive property of diaconal ministers. Others in ministry have claimed these styles and have resented the use of these characteristics to describe diaconal ministry. Diaconal ministers have countered that they welcome everyone to embody these characteristics. Nevertheless the use of style to describe diaconal ministry has raised tensions and confusion. Style has had limited usefulness in describing and alleviating the misunderstanding surrounding diaconal ministry. Style has not captured the entirety of the diaconal vision and experience.

The notion of perspective was introduced in this project as an alternative to the usual function and style understandings of diaconal ministry. Perspective was described as the essential elements of world view and outlook that make up diaconal culture.

The elements of perspective included the theological understandings of gift, call and service. For diaconal ministers, the theology of gift has been applied to affirm their ministry as a worthy contribution to the church and world and also challenged diaconal ministers to welcome equality in the rich diversity and

difference of the whole people of God. The theology of call has usually been understood by diaconal ministers as a discernment of wisdom and a test for the matching of gifts and stream of ministry. The theology of service, symbolized in the basin and towel, has been the most traditional image of the diaconate. A rich history of humility, equality and reversal of power dynamics has accompanied this image, but, with this image, there has also been the threat of servility and subservience. Diaconal ministers in the United Church have wrestled with the tension of this perspective. This project has been able to name some of the elements of the diaconal theological heritage, as a beginning. A systematic and comprehensive theological vision of diaconal ministry for the United Church has not been attempted.

The diaconate has not professed to own the perspective of justice, but the diaconate does carry a special responsibility to remind the church of the call to resist evil and challenge oppression. Diaconal ministers have understood justice from the perspective of the marginality they have experienced in their work and social position within the church. This marginality has been painful and isolating, yet participants in the focus groups spoke of the eye-opening benefits of viewing things from the edges. In their work they have served those on the fringes of society and the church. In the church they have been on the edges of the order of ministry. Their experience of being questioned about their role and labeled as second class has limited their sense of power and privilege and increased their passion for justice. Still, as members of the United Church order of ministry, diaconal ministers have operated with some entitlement. This project has

indicated that there is further work to be done in articulating the tensions and dynamics of privilege and power that exist concurrently with the marginalization of the diaconate.

In this study, integration was highlighted as a diaconal perspective. Diaconal ministers have been committed to practising what they preach, to combining action and reflection, to challenging theological dualisms and to performing the tasks of ministry in a holistic way. As a community, the United Church diaconate has attempted to work on integration of worship and work, play and prayer, mind and heart.

Another diaconal perspective identified was the communal aspect of support and accountability. Focus group participants discussed regional, ecumenical, national, and international diaconal community connections. United Church commitment to diaconal community, extending beyond the training period, has been largely voluntary and optional. Nevertheless, international, national and local networks were deemed desirable by most of the participants in the focus groups. A challenging question remains for the diaconal community within the United Church: how is accountability maintained and sustained when community membership and connection are voluntary and optional?

The history of the diaconate was articulated as a key element in diaconal perspective. Participants in the focus groups demonstrated a sense of connection to the heritage of the diaconate in the Hebrew scriptures, in the early church, in the medieval communities of Beguines and in the deaconess movement. Stories about faithful mentors and outrageous characters who lived

their lives in responsibility and hope were shared. Nevertheless, some of the participants felt they were ill-informed about their heritage. This project highlighted the on-going need to share the story as an element in empowerment and encouragement. In the United Church, diaconal ministry has been traditionally, and has continued to be, largely, a women's ministry. This perspective has had considerable impact on the diaconate because of sexism, patriarchy and gender stereotyping. This project highlighted the on-going need to share the story as an element in social analysis and prophetic witness.

The schema for understanding diaconal ministry as function, style, perspective was proposed and tested in this study. The project had limits; the schema was only tested by a regional sample of the diaconal community. Further and wider testing in other parts of the country, with specific groupings of diaconal ministers, was recognized as a possible next step. Testing for clarity and accessibility outside the diaconal community with ordained and lay members of the church was acknowledged as a following step.

The elements of this schema have not been seen as the only way to interpret diaconal ministry. Over the years a myriad of images and ideas have been attempted in describing the diaconate. A healthy diversity of understanding has characterized the on-going conversation within United Church diaconal ministry. This study has demonstrated that diversity of approach and understanding, and acknowledged the limits of any schema for defining or confining diaconal ministry. This project was not intended to reduce or over-simplify the complexities of this conversation.

Nevertheless, the schema or model has offered an organized way to approach the questions that are asked about diaconal ministry. Because those questions can be demeaning or exhausting the model has provided a helpful tool for non-defensive explanation.

The characteristics of perspective have offered an understanding of the diaconal culture that has added to the concepts of style and function. Perspective has broadened and deepened the traditional explanations and addressed the confusion and misunderstanding in a positive and constructive fashion. Diaconal identity has been influenced by a distinct theological understanding, social location and historical tradition.

The elements of perspective empower diaconal ministers to name their culture and identity with pride. When diaconal values and attitudes are recognized, diaconal identity is clarified. Diaconal ministers share a vocational and theological vision of justice and faith which is compelling and sustaining. The connection to a community, past and present, for diaconal ministers is sustaining and inspiring. Articulation of the marginalized social and ecclesial location contributes to the important work of analysis and resistance. Naming of these cultural perspectives provides diaconal ministers with a sense of rooted-ness, vision, community and understanding. To repeat the comments of one of the focus group participants, diaconal ministers have "their own culture and way of being " and "when you know who your people are, it is easier to know who you are."

## Appendix A

*The series of questions sent to participants prior to the focus groups*

### *Misunderstanding and ambiguity*

In what ways have you experienced/not experienced misunderstanding and confusion around diaconal ministry in the United Church of Canada?

### *Function*

In what ways have the categories of education, service and pastoral care been helpful/unhelpful in understanding and explaining diaconal ministry?

### *Style*

How would you describe the style and approach of diaconal ministry? In what ways have these descriptions been helpful/unhelpful in understanding and explaining diaconal ministry?

### *Perspective*

#### *Community*

In what ways do you understand/not understand the connections to the international and United Church diaconal community?

#### *Marginality*

In what ways is/isn't diaconal ministry a ministry of marginalization?

#### *Justice*

In what ways is/isn't the call to justice a fundamental perspective of diaconal ministry?

#### *Integration*

In what ways is/isn't diaconal ministry shaped by a call to integration (of function, in training, of theology and practice, of action and reflection)?

In what ways are the understandings around perspective: community, marginality, justice and integration, helpful/unhelpful in understanding and explaining diaconal ministry?

## Appendix B

### *The cover letter sent to participants in the focus groups*

Friends,

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of a focus group for my thesis on diaconal ministry. I am deeply grateful that you are willing to take the time to share your insights and background in the diaconate in The United Church of Canada.

I am presently an ordained minister who is in the process of changing my official ministry designation and expression to diaconal. This is not a change that has happened before in the history of the denomination. As part of the work I am doing in preparation for this change, I am involved in a social ministry field placement, social ministry year assignments, and directed reading courses in pastoral care and education. I am also writing a thesis on diaconal ministry for my Masters in Sacred Theology at the University of Winnipeg, Faculty of Theology.

I understand that for most of my ministry I have been involved in functionally diaconal work, doing education, pastoral care and advocacy. My style has, I think (but I am open to challenge and feedback) reflected the diaconal approaches of enabling mutuality and openness to change and growth. My appreciation of diaconal perspective is deepening from my new connections to diaconal organizations and my work in diaconal theological education. But I have so much to learn! I look forward to these sessions with you as an opportunity to grow in my understanding and appreciation of the diaconal perspective.

I want to be “up front” about my thesis so that you can be thorough and constructive in your critique and testing of its suitability against your experience and thinking. I begin with the assumption that diaconal ministry is misunderstood and often invisible in our denomination. Further, I am suggesting that the *functional* definition of diaconal ministry (education, service and pastoral care) has limited usefulness. The defining of diaconal ministry based on *style* (co-leading and co-learning, the vision of mutuality and empowerment, the openness to flexibility and adaptability) is helpful but also has some limitations. The addition of a group of understandings related to *perspective* (marginality, justice, community and integration) adds much to the comprehending of diaconal ministry within The United Church of Canada.

There is no one way to understand diaconal ministry. I could have explored this topic, biblically, historically, ecumenically, theologically. In my view, any of these approaches would have underlined the ambiguity and diversity, complexity and confusion, surrounding diaconal ministry. But in this project, I will employ two basic approaches. The first will be a review of the recent United Church of Canada documents and studies that reference diaconal ministry. The second approach involves you and the focus groups that you have agreed to be a part of.

Three or four groups of three or four diaconal ministers in The United Church of

Canada will gather to engage in discussion and test the thesis I am suggesting. Focus groups allow for dialogical interaction among the participants and allow consideration and reconsideration of responses as viewpoints and experiences are shared. It is a methodology that encourages conversational exchange, honours evolving understanding, and respects the process of communal discernment.

The sessions will be scheduled for three hours in duration. Your time and place are as follows:

Should you wish to know the names of the other participants in your group ahead of time I would be prepared to share that information. Please contact me at 783-4490.

I will facilitate the conversation with open-ended questions. The questions focus on the major points of my thesis and are included with this mailing. I hope that you will have the opportunity to give some thought to the questions prior to the gathering.

You will be asked to sign two consent forms. Both of these are enclosed. I have included them prior to the session so that procedures and expectations are clear from the beginning. If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact me, but we will review the assumptions behind these forms as we begin the sessions.

I am a person of privilege: ordained, male, white, educated, able-bodied, presumed hetero-sexual, employed in the training of diaconal ministers. I attempt to be conscious of and to remember my considerable power. In this study, I will want to be particularly clear with all participants re: the position I am in and the understanding that I hold. I do not want to mis-appropriate or misrepresent the diaconal experience. My passions, privilege and position need to be transparent in order for my self-interest to be evident, my limitations to be apparent and my bias to be corrected.

Again thank you for your willingness to be a part of this study. I am most appreciative.

Ted Dodd

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

I am participating in a focus group to discuss diaconal ministry in the United Church of Canada. This group will take place on \_\_\_\_\_, at \_\_\_\_\_ for a duration of 2 - 3 hours. I am prepared to offer my response to the questions and share my experience as a Diaconal Minister. I am aware that Ted Dodd is the investigator of this study, as part of his thesis for a Masters of Sacred Theology degree.

This study will be an opportunity to reflect on and discuss diaconal ministry. I will be a part of testing a conceptual framework for understanding the diaconate. It is hoped that this involvement will contribute to the on-going conversation and help to clarify the meaning, position and value of diaconal ministry in the United Church.

It is my understanding that

- any changes of developments that might influence my informed consent will be brought to my attention and my further consent sought
- there is no penalty involved should I decide to discontinue or interrupt my involvement
- I have not been misled, by either incomplete disclosure or temporary concealment, about the purpose of this study
- the research is being conducted through a focus group format involving open-ended questions, personal sharing and group discussion
- any reporting of this study will maintain anonymity of participants and yet, I understand that there is danger of my identity being deduced
- the sessions will be tape-recorded
- if permission of all participants is received, upon completion of the project these tapes will be given to the Centre for Christian Studies (if not the tapes will be destroyed)
- there will be no material inducement or financial compensation offered for my participation in this study
- there will be no social or professional inducements or disincentives, no physical stress, no mental discomfort, no attempts to change my behaviour, no third party risk, as a result of my involvement
- I will make a commitment to maintain confidentiality of other participants' remarks
- I recognize that every attempt will be made to maintain anonymity of participants in reporting but that there is some danger that the identity of participants may be deduced by someone other than the investigator
- the written report of these sessions will be available for my perusal and feedback
- I am entitled to report any adverse responses or dissatisfaction from my involvement in this study to the Faculty of Theology and/or University of Winnipeg Senate ethics committees

My participation in this study has not been coerced, manipulated, constrained or be coopted by undue influence. I am involved with my informed consent.

Name:

Signature:  
Date:

## Appendix D

Ted Dodd: Masters of Sacred Theology Thesis Study  
Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada: Function, Style and Perspective”

### Consent to Record Focus Group

I would like to tape the sessions in order to have an accurate and verbatim record of the proceedings. If any participant objects to the taping process, no taping will occur. You have a right and all participants have a right to stop the taping or ask for the tape to be stopped for “off the record” comments during the focus group session. You have a right and all participants have a right to ask for the tapes to be destroyed at any time during or after taping, and into the future. Your consent to be taped is voluntary and there is no penalty for choosing not to agree to taping.

Please check one of the following:

- I **agree** to the taping of the focus group sessions
- I **do not agree** to the taping of the focus group sessions

I want to store the tapes in the Centre for Christian Studies (the only theological school associated with the United Church of Canada which prepares non-aboriginal students for diaconal ministry) library to enhance and contribute to research and dialogue related to diaconal ministry in the United Church. Your anonymity will be compromised by the tapes availability and accessibility in that your identity may be determined by my comments and/or voice recognition. If any of the participants object to the storage and future use of these tapes the tapes will be destroyed immediately upon completion of the project. Your consent to the storage of the tapes in the CCS library is voluntary and there is no penalty for not agreeing.

Please check one of the following:

- I **agree** to storage of the tapes in the CCS library in order that they may be used in future research and classroom programming.
- I **do not agree** to storage of the tapes in the CCS library in order that they may be used in future research and classroom programming.

This research has been approved by the University of Winnipeg Senate Committee on Research and Experimental Ethics. If you have any concerns you may contact the Researcher, Ted Dodd (783-4490), the Chair of the Faculty of Theology Research Ethics Committee, Arthur Walker-Jones (786-9473) or the Chair of the Senate Committee on Human Research and Scholarship, Kristine Hansen (786-9345).

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E  
Statement of Belief  
Diakonia of the United Church of Canada

We are called with all God's people to  
be responsible agents of creative transformation  
support and caring  
liberation and reconciliation  
justice and mercy  
inviting all into a pilgrimage of  
dignity and well-being,  
and a ministry of accompaniment.

And we are called with all God's people  
into a life of discernment and risk.

Our roots are within the church's earliest traditions,  
and we exist today within a world-wide  
expression of diaconal ministry.

Diaconal ministry exists within the ministry  
of the whole community and is the responsibility of that community.

The primary task of diaconal ministry is mutual empowerment  
through education, service and pastoral care.

This includes working together  
to maintain relationships that are life-giving  
and sustaining of community  
to meet immediate needs

and to work to create a just and loving world.

We offer an intentional commitment  
to stand and be with others on the periphery.

Seeking to be faithful to the gospel,  
diaconal ministry remains flexible and  
responsive to the needs of the Church and the world,  
wherever that may lead."

*Statement of Belief adopted in 1992 by Diakonia of the United Church of Canada*

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