

The Essence of Diaconal Ministry in The United Church of Canada Today

The information for this paper comes from responses to a research questionnaire prepared in 1985 by Mary Anne MacFarlane

Diaconal Ministry today continues to reflect a commitment to the laity. Only very recently in its history has Diaconal Ministry been considered a part of the order of ministry. Before that, deaconesses and certified churchmen were considered lay professional Church workers, and had no official status in the courts of the Church. Thus, it is not surprising that the most common response given by Diaconal Ministers to the question "what is the essence of diaconal ministry?" is that it is a ministry which is closely related to the laity. Its purpose is described as to support and equip the laity for their ministry in the world. More specifically, this "equipping" of the laity is seen to involve helping people to identify and develop their gifts and strengths, to examine and express their theology and faith, to understand the reconciling ministry of Jesus and their own call to participate in this ministry, and to begin to work individually and corporately for the promotion of justice and peace in the world. As one respondent to the questionnaire suggested: "the main function is to promote and enable the ministry of the whole people of God".

Within this general focus on the laity, Diaconal Ministers see their ministry as primarily an educational one. "An emphasis on education" is the second most frequent response given to the question of uniqueness. Diaconal Ministers seem to be using the word "education" in one of two ways. Some are clearly referring to the traditional educational programmes of the Church, such as Bible Study, Sunday School, youth work, confirmation classes, and are saying that Diaconal Ministers are unique because they specialize in and lift up this educational work as essential to the life of the Church. Others use the word "education" to refer to a more 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. This understanding of the uniqueness of Diaconal Ministry was stated most succinctly in the Centre for Christian Studies Staff and Student Response to Project: Ministry, "For most ministers, education is one of the many tasks of ministry. For the (Diaconal) Minister in educational ministry, education is the perspective from which all tasks are approached".

The next most frequently-mentioned essential element of Diaconal Ministry is "service" or response to the needs of the Christian community and the world. Respondents speak of the Biblical

understanding of service, of *diakonia*, and point to the example of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Such service, they point out, has little to do with servitude, or with being forced to be subservient or deny the self. As one respondent suggested, "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". Such a servant ministry is radically different from the derogatory and patronizing way in which servanthood is thought of in society. It reflects a conscious choice to embrace a ministry which is not based on status and which leaves itself open to the pain and needs of others. It is a ministry which requires the ability to stand with the suffering, and to work with them for healing and dignity and growth. Thus, as one respondent suggested: "It is the embodiment of the Church's pastoring and service and nurturing functions. Diaconal Ministry affirms them as really valid functions and not simply something that the Church does when they can afford to have a second person."

Service, as distinct from servitude, involves a willingness and an ability to face injustice, both inside and outside of the Church, to critique oppressive structures and to work for social change. As several Diaconal Ministers suggest, as well as responding to the suffering of individuals, the diaconate is also active, and involves developing and implementing strategies which dismantle the social and political structures which oppress people. Several respondents speak of Diaconal Ministry as "prophetic", "justice-oriented" and "focused on social change".

In speaking about what they do, Diaconal Ministers rarely use the words "my ministry". Instead, they speak of mutual ministry, of shared vocation, of collectivity and accountability, including in this both laity and order of ministry. They mention familiarity with and belief in the value of team ministry and learning in community as one of the most exciting things about Diaconal Ministry. Most see Diaconal Ministry as both being shaped by and having validity only in relation to the ministry of others. This springs partly from an understanding of the Church as the "people of God" in which all must participate in ministry, and partly from an understanding and experience of teaching and learning as inseparable processes. Several respondents echo the following comment: "Diaconal Ministry is basically a shared ministry. It involves living out the reality that all authentic

ministry is mutual; it is the work of people together and tends to become open to shared responsibility and trust of other people's ministries." Thus, Diaconal Ministers see themselves as both helping others and being helped themselves to deepen their theology, their responses to God and their appreciation and understanding of themselves and the world. Images of "journeying together" and "co-ministering" are common in the descriptions of ministry.

Such an understanding of shared ministry clearly has implications for the style of ministry used by Diaconal Ministers. Several specifically mention aspects of style or process in their comments on the essence of Diaconal Ministry. They speak of their style as nurturing, supportive and enabling, and see it as growth-oriented, focusing on the development of people of all ages. They talk of standing with people, of being present, of functioning as both a friend and counselor.

A number of the respondents emphasize that the identification of nurturing and supportive roles with Diaconal Ministry clearly has to do with the fact that most Diaconal Ministers have been women. Nurturing and support are functions which society has traditionally emphasized and rewarded in females, while confrontation and assertiveness have been considered more masculine traits. Thus, 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, as less important to the life of the Church than the ordained. One Diaconal Minister describes her educational preparation and early years in the ministry as a time of "indoctrination into secondary status". "The notion was that we were at the call of the minister and the people. Many ideas communicated and emphasized our little importance. Christian education was seen then as marginal/trivial to the "real" functions of ministry (liturgy/pastoral care). We were not expected to 'aspire' to other than our defined roles. We were clearly accountable to the senior ministers in all situations."

Today such perceptions of Diaconal Ministry continue, in spite of the fact that the roles of women in the Church have expanded and changed radically, and in spite of the fact that Diaconal Ministers themselves have expanded their understanding of nurture and service to include social criticism, advocacy, and enablement. Because of its hidden nature, its collegial rather than its solo working style, and its emphasis on processes of growth rather than measurable results, Diaconal Ministry has often been overlooked or undervalued in the life of the church. Yet actually, as one respondent suggests, with its emphasis on probing and questioning, and on helping people to make connections in their lives, such a ministry is central: "Diaconal Ministers are persons who can ask the critical questions as to how growth might happen, how groups and individuals can make decisions and, in general, enabling persons to take ownership of their own growth and life in community, and to affect structures accordingly".

Such a ministry is both difficult and challenging, as the following comment shows: "Diaconal Ministry is educating, enabling people to do their/our ministry. In life it is always easier to do it

yourself than teach another to do the task. Difficult though it is, the Christian faith must be claimed/owned individually and corporately. Diaconal Ministry enables this both in philosophy and style. (The following misprint appeared in a local newspaper, 'Diagonal Minister—ministry with a different slant!')" Because this kind of emphasis on mutuality of ministry and enabling others is radically different from the way in which people in the Church have both thought of and experienced ministry, Diaconal Ministers are well aware that their expression of ministry is seen as both strange and threatening by many in congregations and community groups. Their style of ministry works to break down the gulf between lay and order of ministry, and challenges the need for hierarchies in the Church. Through their work, Diaconal Ministers encounter and openly challenge clericalism in all its forms, including the idea that members of the order of ministry are "the Church", and that clergy are somehow "larger than life". This unique form of ministry based on service and enablement calls the Church to look at what it means by "Church" and "Ministry". Why is *preaching* the word traditionally given more value and prestige than *teaching* the Word? Why is *doing* considered more important than *enabling*? As one respondent stated:

"If working together and focusing on education catches on, then a whole lot of the Church's structures will come tumbling down, taking with them the over-emphasized power and authority of some...we mustn't underestimate the threat that Diaconal Ministry poses to the security of the hierarchy in the Church."

While few respondents speak so bluntly, several describe the difficulty of always using a different style of ministry. They speak of the pain of being described as "not a real minister, or as being somehow less than the real thing". Diaconal Ministers talk of living with a constant awareness that they were "in but still out" of ministry in the Church. The problem, as they describe it, is one of constant exclusion.

Several respondents express discouragement because of the Church's failure to deal with the fundamental issues raised both by their unique expression of ministry and of their second-class treatment by others. Many see their "otherness" and uniqueness as both positive and negative. On the positive side, they see it as essential for the revisioning of all of ministry. On the negative side, they speak of the loneliness and disempowerment of always being the exception, the peculiarity, the odd one. A number of respondents speak of being treated as if they were invisible, and of not being supported by their colleagues. "Diaconal Ministry can be an incredibly painful ministry. It takes a lot of energy to not only do your job, but also to constantly have to explain yourself, to answer questions about why you are not ordained, and why you work the way you do. 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".

Closely tied to this feeling of uniqueness, are comments which talk about the challenge of being different, and of the freedom to risk and experiment which is present in Diaconal Ministry. Many see themselves as pioneers, on the forefront of change in the Church. Others link themselves to the innovative and daring work done by some of the deaconesses of the past. All see it, because of

its closeness to the laity, its lack of structured roles and its short history as part of the order of ministry, as a form of ministry which is essentially open to change, flexible and varied. It is "growth oriented", as one respondent states, and new forms of "service" ministry are emerging continually. Diaconal Ministry means versatility, being able to adapt to the quick-changing needs of the congregation. "In some ways we are like chameleons changing emphasis continually to respond to congregational needs. In some places it might be needs for adult education, sometimes it might be pastoral care, sometimes ministry to/with children and youth. I find the variety to be exciting, challenging and faithful to God's will".

Several respondents observed that this flexibility was made possible because of the "bridge" or "in-between" position of Diaconal Ministers in the Church. Several respondents clearly see themselves as located "on the creative edge of the Church" or as "a bridge between the ordained and the laity". They see their work being most effectively done in a place on the fringe where there is a clear view of what is and is not being responded to through the traditional forms of ministry. They suggest that there is a sense in which Diaconal Ministry is able to respond to needs which are not being met elsewhere, to identify gaps in service, and to minister with people who are falling through the cracks. As one respondent suggests: "Diaconal Ministry is infused with both imagination and dedication to the Church so that what is not being done in total ministry is noted and acted upon... There is always a challenge to do what is not being done, which is needed—for example, education, welfare, counseling, advocacy".

In the process of sharing this information on the essence of Diaconal Ministry with the Committee on Theological Education for Ministry, the image of Diaconal Ministry as enabling the people of God to enter into and remain faithful on "the long march through the institution" emerged. Diaconal Ministers have a commitment to nurturing, working in community, and traveling with others as they are both victimized by and work towards change within the world and its institutions. Diaconal Ministry can and does enable people to uphold the vision of the Gospel, and participates in Christ's ministry as He expressed it in the Lukan passage (Luke 4:16-20)—it involves bringing good news, proclaiming release, bringing sight to the blind and sustaining the broken in spirit.

Educational Essentials for Diaconal Ministry

The style and understanding of ministry held by Diaconal Ministers has clearly been shaped by the education which they received. With the Centre for Christian Studies and its predecessors having provided the educational preparation for all but a few Diaconal Ministers, it is not surprising that the educational philosophy of the Centre finds embodiment in the ministry of its graduates. In answering the questionnaire, many Diaconal Ministers, particularly those who had entered Diaconal Ministry in the last five years, used many similar words to describe the values of their educational preparation and to describe the style of their own ministry. This would indicate that their education was extremely significant, not only in terms of providing them with

specific educational skills, but also in shaping their identity as Diaconal Ministers.

Both the *Women in Ministry Research Project* of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and the present questionnaire results show that the vast majority of Diaconal Ministers surveyed found their educational preparation extremely valuable. For example, the *Women in Ministry Report* makes the following statement: "Diaconal Ministers appear to have been the most satisfied (with their theological training) which is a reflection largely on the Centre for Christian Studies in Toronto, the principal training centre for Diaconal Ministers". Over ninety percent of present Diaconal Ministers, the Task Group discovered, have received their educational preparation through this institution or its various predecessors.

Most Diaconal Ministers are able to isolate some essentials for educational preparation by articulating what was most valuable and what was least valuable (or lacking) in their educational preparation. While answers varied somewhat according to when individual Diaconal Ministers graduated, there are remarkable similarities in their answers across most time periods.

Most frequently mentioned as an essential ingredient of effective educational preparation is field education, or the provision of an opportunity to work within a congregation or an institutional setting while preparing for ministry. For such an experience to be valuable, respondents stated that there must be built-in regular opportunities for reflection and supervision with a trained supervisor who has both an understanding of the philosophy and history of Diaconal Ministry and an interest in exploring all aspects of ministry as a co-learner with the diaconal student. The actual working placement must provide opportunities for goal-setting, planning, designing, implementing and evaluating learning experiences, and must be similar to the actual work that Diaconal Ministers do. Thus, an effective field work setting must provide learning opportunities, which allow for mutuality, self-discovery and affirmation and which call for skills and understanding related to education, service and pastoral care. Several respondents state that provision of a trained supervisor was critical, and that, without this, field work often turned out to be either a waste of time or so full of "growth-denying" characteristics that "it was difficult to see any learning experiences at all".

Diaconal Ministers see a strong and varied academic component as essential for their educational preparation. More specifically, they list Biblical Studies and courses in theology as most significant, and state that the emphasis in both of these must be personal and practical. Through these studies, they expect to learn how to do Biblical exegesis, how to enable others to let the scriptures speak to their lives, how to understand the theological tradition of the Church and articulate their own understanding of God, self and the world, and how to wrestle with ethical and moral issues in their own lives and in the world. As well as Biblical Studies and theology, respondents also mention a need for courses in worship, education, church history, church polity, psychology and pastoral theology.

In terms of what was missing from their educational preparation,

many Diaconal Ministers responded that there is a need for a course which deals specifically with the history and development of Diaconal Ministry, from its beginnings in the early Church to its present form in the United Church. Reference should also be included to Diaconal Orders in other denominations around the world, and the history and ethos of Diaconal Ministry should be set within the context of the whole ministry of the Church. Several respondents feel that careful theological reflection on the meaning of *diakonia* and on its unique history in the Christian community would help in the identity formation of Diaconal Ministers, and should not be ignored or minimized.

Several comments on the questionnaires which concerned educational essentials focused on aspects of the style or processes of education rather than on the content. Diaconal Ministers see as essential the continuation of an interdependent style of learning, which emphasizes processes of listening, mutual questioning, consensus, partnership and cooperation. Such a style of education, Diaconal Ministers suggest, breaks down the distinctions between teachers and learners and invites all to participate in a mutual time of affirmation, challenge and growth. As one respondent suggests, this style sets the "context for all of Diaconal Ministry, where no one has power over another, and everyone works for the empowerment of all". Others comment that this style of education is particularly valuable because it prepares Diaconal Ministers for teaching and learning with others in the Church and community.

The next most frequently expressed comment about Diaconal Ministry education is that it must include time and a process which helps the participants to integrate the academic, spiritual and practical aspects of their work so that each contributes to and challenges the other two. Otherwise, learning becomes compartmentalized, and the kind of personal awareness and ability to ask questions and make connections which is so important in ministry does not develop. Also, respondents noted that the content and learning activities used in education must be essentially learner-directed. They believed that their education was particularly valuable because they were encouraged and supported to take responsibility for deciding what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it. Participation in such a programme, they observed, not only forces students to get in touch with their own strengths and weaknesses, but also results in them actually "learning how to learn". In connection with this, other respondents stress qualities such as "non-directive", "flexible", "constantly evolving" and "owned by the learners" as essential.

Other respondents mention that participatory evaluation processes and skills are an important part of all educational experiences. Constant evaluation enables them to identify learnings, plan for future areas of exploration, and adapt styles and programmes to make them more effective. Other aspects of their education which Diaconal Ministers listed as most significant are: the strong emphasis on social and political analysis and action, the use of an action/reflection model, the practical emphasis, and the presence of Diaconal Ministers as teachers. Such teachers are seen as role models who both manage and demonstrate the unique and valuable perspective that Diaconal Ministry brings to the Church.