

## DIACONAL VOCATION AND IDENTITY

by Ted Dodd April 2016

Several of the biblical stories of call evoke larger than life theophany. Isaiah's vision includes smoke and seraphim. Mary is visited by Gabriel. Paul is blinded on his way to Damascus. My call to diaconal ministry was not that dramatic. It was a quieter nudging toward integrity; a call does not have to be Cecille B. DeMille theatrics and instantaneous flashiness to be valid or authentic.

Numerous scriptural stories of call include patterns of denial and resistance. Sarah laughs in disbelief. Moses fears public speaking. Jeremiah feels he is too young. Jonah runs from Ninevah. In some ways my call to diaconal ministry reflects that pattern of denial and resistance. For 23 years, I was ordained to Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care. In 2003, I was commissioned to diaconal ministry of Education, Service and Pastoral Care. I avoided this switch for a number of years.

At seminary in the 70s, I was aware of the option for, of what was then called, commissioned ministry. However, I chose ordained ministry without questioning, largely because it was the norm. In the late 80's, I was in a Conference staff position doing work mostly focused on education and justice. At a national gathering, I was in conversation with one of my diaconal friends. She was sharing her passion for diaconal ministry. I don't remember the exact course of the conversation but at some point I erupted defensively and said, "So should I give up my ordination and become diaconal because the kind of work I am doing is more diaconal than ordained?" She looked back at me, shrugged and said, splitting the syllables, "May . . . be."

At the time it seemed an absurd suggestion: complicated, unnecessary, outrageous and even, a bit scary. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, the move carries a sense of faithful inevitability. I do not regret, in any way, the blessing of my years as an ordained person. The church offered me opportunities for growth that honoured my gifts and enhanced my skills. I do not suggest that this move is right for anyone else. It was, and is, right for me; to not make this change would have been dishonest and cowardly.

In 1998, I had been hired to teach at the Centre for Christian Studies. That fall, the (now defunct) national Committee on Diaconal Ministry met in Winnipeg. There was a time of connection with committee and staff. At a break, one of the questions directed toward me was, "So you're ordained; how does that influence your work with diaconal students?" Not wanting to be apologetic or defensive, I explained that most of my ministry had been diaconal in function and I hoped in style. It was a nudge.

In the fall of 1999, while facilitating a session on diaconal formation, a student started venting, "It kind of bugs me when some non-diaconal folk say 'I work in a diaconal style', when they don't have to walk the diaconal walk." I didn't want to be in that position. It felt hypocritical, even dishonest.

In May 2000, the Diakonia of the United Church of Canada gathered for their biennial meeting. For the first time, I was a part of this national community. We discussed diaconal history, perspective, advocacy and international organizations. I was welcomed and included. I considered this community of acceptance, accountability and advocacy to be "my people" -- and I wanted to make a deeper commitment. I didn't want to just claim "adherent" status.

The United Church defines diaconal ministry in terms of *function*. We commission diaconal ministers to Education, Service and Pastoral Care. Many diaconal ministers do work in community ministries, lead congregational youth and family efforts, serve in chaplaincies. However, many diaconal ministers function in so-called "solo" ministries where a heavy emphasis is placed on Sunday morning worship and sacramental leadership. A certain level of tension surrounds this deployment of diaconal ministers into what is/was traditionally ordained territory. Personally, I find much of the discussion is layered with a competitive spirit that is less than a gracious ideal. I believe the functional way of defining ministry reduces vocation to a job description. And it does not adequately address any sense of confusion or

misunderstanding amongst the various streams of ministry.

Sometimes diaconal ministers describe their vocation in terms of *style*. Commitment to accompaniment, empowerment and mutuality are articulated faith values of the diaconal community.<sup>1</sup> These values are not, of course, unique to the diaconal community. Obviously, many in all streams of ministry operate with a sense of humble servanthood, pay attention to power and privilege, and employ facilitative practices.

For me, *style*, as a way of understanding diaconal ministry holds limited appeal. For one reason, *style* projects a sense of fleeting fashion and trendy superficiality. Diaconia is not a flash in the pan; its history is profound and rich. The United Church did not invent diaconal ministry in some 60s experimental fad. The gospel message indicates that Jesus saw his ministry in terms of diaconia: “I am among us as one who serves (*diakoneo*)”<sup>2</sup>. “[I] came not to be served but to serve (*diakoneo*)”<sup>3</sup> And in turn, all the baptized are called to embody that call. The Reformation adage, “the priesthood of all believers” needs to be expanded to remind the church to be the “*diakonia* of all believers.” Enabling and respectful approaches to ministry remain important to diaconal ministers. However, we cannot (and I would say do not) claim any special claim on these approaches. In my mind, “*style*” does not provide enough substance or content to capture the depth of our call.

Many of us, more and more, understand diaconal ministry in terms of *identity*. We are privileged in our position within the order of ministry in the United Church of Canada. Yet, Diaconal ministry is not the norm and, largely because of that, a certain degree of marginalization exists. Diaconal ministers are constantly asked to justify and explain their designation. The preparation for diaconal ministry is considered, by some, to be inferior. A repeated question to diaconal folks is, “When are you going to become a ‘real’ minister?”

However, diaconal ministers continue to embrace the positive aspects of our identity. Our history starts from the very beginning of the early church. In Acts 6, the seven chosen for a ministry of food security and care of the vulnerable are traditionally described as deacons. Phoebe is named a deacon in Romans 16:1. First Timothy outlines the desired qualities in a deacon. Even when the church, relegated the diaconate to a “stepping stone” phase on the way to priesthood, diaconal ministries emerged through creative work like the Beguines and the Franciscans. Remarkably, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the diaconate was imaginatively restored through the deaconess movement.

Much of our present international and ecumenical diaconal impetus emerged as a result of that history. I have been blessed to attend diaconal conferences and assemblies on three continents. I have been hosted in diaconal motherhouses in Germany and Brazil. I have danced, partied, and stayed up late to sing, beside African, Pakistani, Scandinavian, Caribbean and Pilipino diaconal brothers and sisters. I have worshipped and studied with Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian expressions of *diakonia*. The rich and diverse mix of languages, cultures, theologies and liturgical practices are undergirded by an abiding sense of connection as diaconal people. This global and interdenominational diaconal community shapes and informs our identity.

Images of diaconia influence our sense of identity. In 2002, Louise Williams shared five images with the assembly of *Diakonia* of The Americas and Caribbean (DOTAC)<sup>4</sup>:

- **Servant:** This traditional image, associated with the towel and basin of foot washing, has been cherished, in diaconal circles, for its reversal of privilege and balancing of power. The gospels are full of reversals - the least are first, a Samaritan is good, children are blessed, a Syro-Phoenician

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<sup>1</sup> *Diakonia* of The United Church of Canada, “Statement of Vision”, [www.ducc.ca](http://www.ducc.ca), 28 April, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:27

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:45

<sup>4</sup> <http://ducc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Claiming-Authority-Address-to-2002-DOTAC-meeting-Louise-Williams.pdf>

woman changes the rabbi's mind. In a world and church which orders life and ministry hierarchically and competitively, diaconal ministers appreciate this more egalitarian emphasis. However, we caution and ask that the image of servant not be used to re-victimize those who have no choice about their servanthood. Instead of servanthood, many are adopting language of allies and friendship as models of solidarity and partnership.

- Table server: Traditionally, the Greek word *diakonia*, was said to be associated with the one who serves at table. Some controversy exists about the legitimacy of this etymology.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding those debates, the image carries importance for diaconal ministers because it highlights our call toward hospitality and welcome.
- Story teller: Williams states, "From the fourth century, reading the gospel was seen as a diaconal task."<sup>6</sup> The deacons in the early church had a teaching and catechetical role in preparing people for baptism. Diaconal ministers see themselves as empowering educators who equip folks to reflect on the scriptural story but also to ponder their own stories as holy text.
- Door keeper: When the early church was under persecution, it was the deacons' role to safeguard the assembly by standing at the entrance and monitoring those who passed through. For today's diaconal ministers, this threshold image helpfully indicates the work of standing between church and world. Other images of bridge, go-between or ambassador point to the diaconal role in attempting to connect sacred and secular, worship and work, prayer and action.
- Light bearer: In the Easter Vigil, it is the liturgical role, in some traditions, for the deacon to light the Paschal candle. This image of bearing the light highlights the diaconal role in keeping hope alive in a suffering world. It also challenges us to shed light in the areas of darkness.

Many images attempt to encapsulate diaconal ministry. None of them perfectly encapsulates the challenge and delight of this vocation. However, these rich symbols, and the discussion that surrounds them, guide and shape our diaconal identity.

Several years ago, I was in Chicago attending a conference. One evening worship was offered from an Afro-American community. The sermon was delivered in the amazing "call-response" format. An astounding energy emerged from the congregation as participants encouraged their preacher to "tell it", "come on", "amen, amen."

The text was Samuel waking up Eli in the middle of the night. The preacher said, "God was calling Samuel." The congregation responded, "Oh yes." The preacher continued, "God was calling Samuel and God is calling you." The congregation replied, "Yes, sir." The preacher was revved up (pun intended): "God is calling you. God is calling on a direct line." Then the preacher reached a rhetorical peak, "God is calling on a direct line," and he lowered his voice and leaned into the microphone, ". . . but it is a collect call." And the congregation applauded with a mix of amusement and recognition and conviction.

A call insists that we respond. In responding to the diaconal call I have been blessed over and over again.

This article first appeared in *Touchstone* (Canada).

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<sup>5</sup> John N. Collins. *Diakonia--Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. Oxford, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, page 6.