

Stevenson School for Ministry focuses formation on competencies

Equipping Deacons for an exciting, if unknowable future in ministry

BY DEACON W. MICHAEL NAILOR

Before entering into discernment with my parish and my diocese over the question of my future in ordained ministry, I taught high school students. The most frequently asked question in my English classroom was not about themes in literature or strategies in persuasion. By far - the most frequent question I was asked by my students was, "Is this going to be on the test?" When I was in charge of creating the assessments in my classroom, I could answer this question definitively. Towards the end of my career standardized tests became the tests that mattered. I was never quite sure what these unknown test-makers would include. Designing instruction used to be simple. As assessments slipped out of the control of the teachers in the classroom - designing instruction became a game of informed guessing. Will what we think is important to teach our students really be on the test?

"The formation ministry of our diocese ...has become so much more than simply a school to raise up deacons for the diocese."

It is certainly no revelation to any observer of Christianity in America that "being the Church" in the 21st century is a radically different proposition than it was just a generation ago. And with it, the work of the Deacon in the Episcopal Church is changing. Susanne Watson Epting captures this ongoing change in her 2015 book, *Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed*, in the metaphor of waves sweeping over the church and through the diaconate. According to Epting we are now heading into "the seventh wave (from about 2005 to the present), one of integration, ...one in which we see many of these things coming together: engaging the diakonia of all believers, equipping the saints, interpreting the world, and advocating - not only in congregations, but on behalf of the diocese." We are called on as Deacons not only "to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world" but "to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by ...word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship." Integrating this inward flow of information about the world to the Church and this outward flow of love to the world is a job for which there is no uniform description. If the future work of a Deacon must be left open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, then the preparation of Deacons needs to be a bit open-ended as well. How do we as a church engage in the "informed guessing" necessary to equip deacons for an exciting, if unknowable future in ministry?

Partially in response to this question, the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania has taken an in-depth look at the trends shaping ministry in our part of the church. This examination was facilitated by our new Bishop, The Rt. Rev. Audrey C. Scanlan, and her three-year plan to thoroughly understand the needs and desires of our church before making any major changes. The teaching/formation ministry of our diocese has benefited from these new perspectives. It has become so much more than simply a school to raise up deacons for the diocese. But in this process the way that we prepare deacons for servant leadership has gone through what for us is a radical change. Perhaps there are lessons in what we have done that have implications for the preparation of deacons across the church.

Diocesan Formation

In our Diocese, The Bishop Dean T.

Stevenson School for Ministry is dedicated

to the lifelong learning and discernment processes of everyone. SSFM now includes:

- Vocational Formation for Lay Ministry
- Vocational Formation for the Ministry of Deacons
- Vocational Formation for the Ministry of locally-trained Priests
- Leadership Days - training for leaders in the diocese and our parishes under the title of the Academy for Missional Formation
- Support for clergy who are new to the diocese or who are newly ordained under the title of Vital and Effective Leadership Institute
- Anglican Studies Program offered for and through a nearby interdenominational seminary
- Resources and support for Youth Ministry
- Resources and support for Children's Ministry

Bringing all of these ministry/formation activities under one organizational function has led to certain economies of scale through sharing resources and sharing programs. But more importantly, in a small diocese such as ours it has allowed the pooling of knowledge and wisdom of a core group of people who are interested in education and formation instead of separating our available volunteers into silos with unique (and sometimes competing!) interests and concerns.

The vision was articulated best by our Bishop: "A part of the life of the diocese, the Stevenson School for Ministry is a diocesan-run school that can provide quality programming for all ages and stages in faith formation as well as solid vocational training. Such an all-encompassing approach is necessary for walking with God as faithful disciples in the 21st century. It is the vehicle by which we are equipping ourselves to participate in God's mission."

As we work to prepare ourselves, we also seek partners. The Diocese of Bethlehem, the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the ELCA, and the Lancaster Theological Seminary have all contributed to this vision and are recruiting students for the Stevenson School.

Deacon Formation: Focusing on Competencies

One of the most sweeping changes that the Stevenson School has implemented is a change in the way that we prepare Deacons. As we strive to prepare sixth- or seventh-wave deacons in Epting's formulation, we chose to change our model from one that was based on academic performance to one that is based on competencies. To us, that means that we need to develop in participants the tools necessary to perform adequately the tasks of ministry as we anticipate them to be upon their ordination, but also to create an openness to tasks of ministry that are currently unimagined. We hold competencies then to be not only for current work and learning but that they should create a foundation for future growth and learning in ministry. Our work was founded upon insights gleaned from the *Iona Report: The Diaconate in the Anglican Church of Canada* and *Competencies for Deacons 2017* by the Association of Episcopal Deacons.

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The competency areas that we chose to include are:

- Diakonia and the Diaconate
- Human Awareness and Understanding
- Spirituality and Spiritual Practice
- Practical Training and Experience
- Church Polity and Diaconal Ministry in the Public Square
- Sacred Scripture
- Christian History and Tradition

Each of the competency areas were then detailed by adding specific competencies, objectives and related courses offered within the Stevenson School. Within the scope of this article it is not possible to share them all but an example from our first competency area will hopefully be instructive:

Competency: The deacon must show understanding of the biblical concept of *diakonia* and its relationship to the diaconate.

Objective: The candidate should be able to trace the origin of the diaconate from biblical and early church roots and its development in the Middle Ages, Reformation and the modern period.

Related SSFM Courses: The Deacon's Path, The Message of Mission, Church History 1, Church History 2.

Competency: The deacon must identify and articulate a personal role and identity in diaconal ministry.

Objective: The candidate should be able to explain how a personal sense of call and practice of ministry relates to the office of deacon.

Related SSFM Courses: The Deacon's Path, Deacons in Action

As a result of our redesign, our curriculum for the Deacon Track in the SSFM now consists of a minimum of 12 courses. Our Fall and Spring Sessions consist of an in-person orientation weekend for the course, followed by 10 weeks of online work, completed by a weekend reorientation session. Our Summer Sessions are more intensive with a single day in-person session, followed by 5 weeks of online work, completed by a one-day in-person session.

The SSFM courses required for the Deacon's certificate include:

- The Holy Scriptures (2 courses)
- The History of the Christian Church (1 course)
- Christian Theology (1 course)
- Christian Ethics and Moral Theology (1 course)
- Christian Worship (1 course)
- Practice of Ministry (5 courses)
- Spirituality (1 course)

Other canonical areas of study that are required for ordination are also offered through the School such as the prevention of sexual misconduct, the Church's teaching on racism, and Title IV in the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church.

SSFM has also considered carefully the audiences that may be open to this sort of discernment and formation. In utilizing competencies as opposed to academic requirements we seek to honor the gifts and experiences each student brings to our programs and to seek to particularly serve the student who currently works a full-time job or who has full-time family commitments.

What, in fact, will be "on the test" when the Deacons that we are preparing today take their place in the ordained ministry of our church? We in the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania are happy to share more of our "informed guessing" with you and we hope that you will, likewise, share your wisdom with us.

For more information on the Stevenson School for Ministry please contact The Very Rev. Robyn J. Szoke-Coolidge, SSFM Dean at rszoke@diocesecpa.org.

W. Michael Nailor, retired from teaching at the high school and college levels, was ordained in September. He completed studies at the Stevenson School for Ministry and now serves as secretary of its Board of Directors.

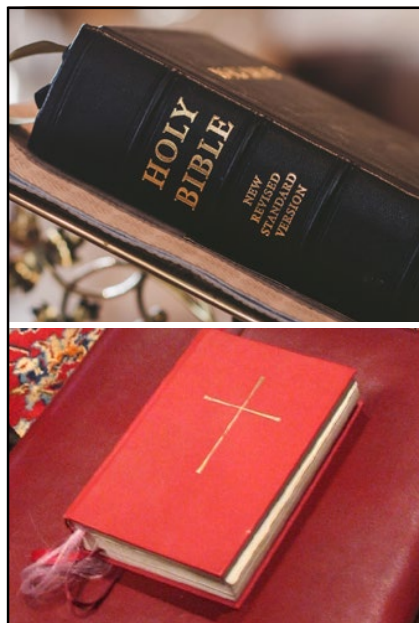
Resources

Stevenson School for Ministry: www.diocesecpa.org/ssfm

Competencies for Deacons 2017: <https://www.episcopaldeacons.org/uploads/2/6/7/3/26739998/competencies2017.pdf>

Epting, Susanne W. *Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed*, 2015.

The Iona Report: <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/iona-report.pdf>



Bibles, BCP & Hymnals available at no charge

BY DEACON KEITH MCCOY

Among the many groups in the Exhibit Area during July's General Convention was The Bible and Common Prayer Book Society of The Episcopal Church. Over two hundred years old, its mission is to provide bibles, hymnals and the Book of Common Prayer to worshipping communities, free of charge.

In chatting with the hosts at the booth, I found that the BCPBS was willing to provide these key items not just to parishes, but to any group meeting on a regular basis that needs these tools. That would include regular services in jails, mission start-ups, and other off-site gatherings of Episcopalians, confirmed or potential.

The process is simple. The minister responsible for the gatherings needs to send a request to the BCPBS asking for specific books in specific quantities. The request needs to be counter-signed by your bishop. BCPs are available in English and Spanish; plans for Mandarin are in the works.

Of course, if you can pay for your own BCPs and bibles, you should. This is for ministries which are operating on a shoestring and would benefit from having these books. For a deacon involved with a community outside the church walls, this is a valuable resource to enhance that ministry.

They also accept financial donations, which are tax deductible.

For more information, visit www.biblesandprayerbooks.org.