



Report and Recommendations of the Word and Service Task Force

1. Background

Since 1993, the ELCA has maintained four public ministry rosters: the roster of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament, and three lay rosters: associates in ministry, deaconesses and diaconal ministers. For each roster, a unique function, set of standards and required preparation has been maintained. The integral role of rostered lay ministry in the ELCA has contributed much to the life and mission of the church in the world.

Beginning in 2007, a series of regional consultations, study and dialogue began to examine the work and ministry of these three lay rosters, and these conversations eventually led the ELCA Church Council to form a Word and Service Task Force. Early in its work, the task force began to focus its work on recognizing the essential nature of diaconal service to the mission of the people of God in the ELCA. The task force believes that this calling would be strengthened by the convergence of the three lay rosters of the ELCA into one and by a redefinition of this one new roster.

Based on an interim report from the Word and Service Task Force delivered in November 2013, the Church Council voted in part:

To affirm the preliminary conclusion of the Word and Service Task Force that this church should move toward creation of a single unified lay roster of Word and Service ministry...

To authorize the Word and Service Task Force to continue its work in order to facilitate the creation of such a unified roster, to develop a process outlining how the existing lay rosters would be closed, and to provide a process for transition of existing associates in ministry, diaconal ministers and deaconesses into such a new roster, and, in collaboration with the Office of the Secretary, to consider and propose possible amendments to the *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* to accomplish its recommendations;

Informed by widespread communication with persons on existing rosters, the task force recommended that the question of entrance rite for this new roster be considered by a different group. The Church Council created a separate team, the Entrance Rite Discernment Group, to consider and make recommendations on this matter.

2. Theology and Practice

In every age, the church has responded to changing contexts and changing needs through its proclamation of the Gospel, its ministry in the world, and the leaders it has called to serve. The recommendation to establish a single roster of ministry of Word and Service is thus not only about merging leadership rosters. It is rather a matter of addressing with new urgency the church's response to the needs of the world in the 21st century.

Christians have always emphasized the need to live faithfully and actively with care for the neighbor, our own individual identity and purpose already having been secured for us by the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Diaconal service strengthens this church's right emphasis on evangelical mission as our personal and social expression of the love of God. Consequently, we seek to live out our catholic faith in service to the neighbor and, with our ever-reforming Lutheran attitude, we are free to do so in whatever ways prove most effective in particular contexts. One way we practice faithful discipleship is by constantly sharpening the shape and emphasizing the content of public diaconal ministry.

In a distinctive manner, the ministry of Word and Service can add a new quality of agility to this church's commitment to God's mission through the church with a renewed vision of the meaning of discipleship and a renewed appreciation of the essential role of diaconal service for all the people of God. A ministry of Word and Service not only aids the ELCA's own members' growth in discipleship, it also expands the presence of this church in the world. Ministers of Word and Service could inspire the imaginations of innumerable ELCA members with a hunger for personal purpose and a passion for public service. Partnerships between ministers of Word and Sacrament and Word and Service open innumerable opportunities for creative and enriched evangelical outreach and mission in the world.

Whatever their particular role or context, those on the new roster of Word and Service would strive to empower, equip and encourage the people of God for their daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation. Ministers of Word and Service would be distinctive from and work in complementarity with the ministers of Word and

Sacrament and with and for the ministry of all the baptized. The two rostered ministries will work collaboratively to inspire the whole ministry of the church.

We believe that the leadership of the church is a key asset for church renewal. The revised office of Word and Service will strengthen and enrich that leadership for the sake of the Gospel. Achieving the expected benefits from the complementary rosters of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Ministers of Word and Service will require extensive and persistent advocacy for a new vision of ministry leadership that ultimately extends across and through all the baptized people of God.

Therefore, our recommendations below reflect a belief that a renewed diaconal ministry, designed to stand alongside the ministry of Word and Sacrament, will enhance this church's ability to better realize its mission today. Such a diaconal ministry is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related and missionally driven. [For a more expansive and formal discussion of the theological rationale, see Appendix A: *A Theology for One Lutheran Diaconate in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*]

3. History and Proposed Title: Deacon

The Task Force recommends that the title "Deacon" be given to ELCA ministers of Word and Service. While no title may be universally accepted at the start of this roster in the ELCA, the term deacon is nevertheless perhaps the best single term encompassing biblical, ecumenical and popular understandings of servant leadership. From the Book of Acts through all the reforms of the church catholic into contemporary ecumenical practices around the globe, the term deacon is most used and understood.

In popular usage, the church has used the terms deacon, deaconess, diaconal or diakonia for many years. The church has utilized the word deacon in various ways in the past, and forms of training and the formation for deacons, as well as public or ecclesial recognition for this ministry, have varied. For example, the ELCA, in its three expressions, has experienced these types of diaconal service contexts just in recent history:

Deaconess of the ELCA	Lutheran Deaconess Association
Rostered Diaconal Minister	(while not an agency of the ELCA, some members are on the ELCA roster)
Synodical Deacon	Diakonia Program
Congregational or Parish Deacon	

Finally, many of our full communion partners, including the United Methodist Church and The Episcopal Church, include diaconal offices in their ministry, as do many members of The Lutheran World Federation. [For further examples, see the Appendix B: *Here a Deacon, There a Deacon, Everywhere a Deacon.*] Conversation with our full communion partners demonstrates that they respect our decisions and appreciate our approach to complex questions. Our partners in mission and ministry have already indicated that any decision the ELCA makes on the movement to one roster and on an entrance rite will be honored and respected. Developing a roster of deacons could enhance the opportunities for partnership in mission.

Whatever the particular role or context, those who perform the ministry of deacon worldwide and in the ELCA carry responsibility for some form of service ministry. While this service ministry often takes place on the frontiers of the church's outreach, it also includes service in local congregational and other gathered faith community settings through the proclamation of the Word in preaching, leading public prayer, teaching, and leading music as well as through leadership in such areas as education, administration and youth ministry. In carrying forward these traditions, all deacons on the roster of the ELCA will maintain responsibility to empower, equip and encourage the whole people of God for their own daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation.

4. The Character of a Deacon

The Word and Service Task Force has developed a set of expectations for this new roster. Every deacon shall:

- Be rooted in the word of God, fulfilling a gospel-centered purpose that proclaims and furthers the reign of God among us in the community, the nation and abroad;
- Daily return to baptism with prayer and attention to their spiritual lives;
- Advocate a prophetic diakonia that commits itself to risk-taking and innovative service both within the church and on the frontiers of the church's outreach, giving particular attention to the suffering places in God's world;
- Work for justice in solidarity with the poor and oppressed proclaiming God's love for the world;
- Equip the baptized for ministry in God's world, affirming the gifts of all people;

- Encourage mutual relationships that invite participation and accompaniment of others in God’s mission;
- Practice stewardship that respects God’s gift of time, talents and resources;
- Be grounded in a gathered community for ongoing diaconal formation;
- Share knowledge of the ELCA and its wider ministry of the gospel, and advocate for the work of all expressions of this church; and
- Identify and encourage qualified persons to prepare for ministry of the gospel.

In sum, whatever their particular role or context, whether deeply engaged in proclamation and service in non-ecclesial contexts or serving in congregational or other church settings, those on the roster of Word and Service will strive to empower, equip and encourage the people of God for their daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation. Consequently, the new roster will consist of those who have been identified, formed, trained and called for ministries of Word and Service throughout the whole church through locally stewarded churchwide processes as outlined in the Candidacy Manual. Rostered deacons will be supported by and accountable to churchwide standards and commitments as well as the synodical and local accountabilities and support of the ministries they serve. Rostered deacons will have responsibility and opportunity for engagement in broader ecumenical ministerial and ecclesial relationships. Unlike synodical or congregational deacons currently serving in particular settings, the ministry and rostering of deacons on the roster of the ELCA may be recognized and transferred across synods and institutions.

5. Transition

Giving thanks to God for the ministry of all who have served and are serving on the present lay rosters, as well as working to make the transition from three rosters to one unified roster as smooth as possible, the task force believes the following matters deserve attention:

- All members (active, including on leave from call; on disability; or retired) on the current three rosters should automatically be transferred onto the new roster, unless they choose to resign from their current roster.
- On the new roster, the date of entering public ministry for each transferred leader should correspond with the original date of consecration or commissioning onto their previous roster.
- Rostered leaders and candidates in process should be encouraged to attend gatherings (regional or however most practical) of transition to celebrate the new roster and provide formation for a common ethos of the diaconate, including its biblical, historical, ecumenical and missional emphases. We recommend the ELCA investigate financial support for these gatherings.
- At the time that the 2016 Churchwide Assembly adopts the proposed change to the Word and Service rosters, the existing rosters should be closed to new candidates. The new unified roster will officially replace the existing rosters on January 1, 2017, to give existing roster members time to decide whether or not they wish to make the transition.
- The formation of a new roster will require a time of education for existing rostered leaders and for congregations, synods and candidacy committees. Resources for use in these settings should be developed. In particular, resources should be developed that will assist and deepen the church’s understanding of *diakonia*.
- New financial resources and efforts, including both transitional events for ‘grand-parented’ deacons and ongoing events for candidates will be required during this time of transition.
- The new roster will require reconsideration of the representational principles in the constitution.
- Realizing the promise that could result from new partnerships between ministers of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service will require extensive and persistent advocacy for a new vision of ministry leadership, among both rostered and non-rostered leaders of the church.
- Questions regarding appropriate entrance rite will continue to be addressed by the Church Council-appointed Entrance Rite Discernment Group. This group is encouraged to continue their conversation utilizing the work of the 1993 Task Force that produced the *Study of Ministry*.
- Recognizing that new patterns of ministries and opportunities for mission will continue to emerge in the future, the ELCA should engage in broad-based, intentional, open conversation and discernment focused on various leadership needs to determine what forms of leadership might best serve God’s mission for the sake of the world.

- The time leading up to and including the 2016 Churchwide Assembly should be utilized to facilitate these discussions and to equip and empower voting members to continue these conversations in their congregations, conferences and synods.
- The church should continue to provide opportunity for reflection on a theology of servant ministry in the world, on ways in which the church can more fully honor, support and uplift the gifts of ministers of Word and Service, and reflection on the future for these ministers of Word and Service in the face of changing opportunities for call.

6. The ELCA Word and Service Task Force recommends that the ELCA:

1. Establish a single, unified roster of Word and Service;
2. Give the title Deacon to those persons on the new roster;
3. Ensure that the existing rosters of Associates in Ministry, Deaconess and Diaconal Minister be automatically transferred to the roster of Deacons unless a person on an existing roster declines, and that the existing rosters be then eliminated by January 1, 2017;
4. Modify the ELCA candidacy process to include this new roster;
5. Charge the Office of the Secretary to propose appropriate constitutional amendments to effect this change;
6. Use consecration as the entrance rite for this new roster until such time as the Entrance Rite Discernment Group makes a final recommendation for an appropriate rite;
7. Arrange for funding for transition events and ongoing leadership and formation events to ensure growth and understanding of the Word and Service roster;
8. Arrange for the preparation of appropriate and informative materials for the church's ongoing study; and
9. Refer the resulting amending/amended documents to the 2016 Churchwide Assembly for approval as necessary.

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A Theology for One Lutheran Diaconate in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The tri-fold character of our life in God

Those who love and know God through the good news of Jesus Christ and the movement of the Holy Spirit intuitively practice a life of proclamation-thanksgiving-service (*Kerygma-Eucharistia-Diakonia*). Proclaiming the gospel of justification, joyfully offering thanksgiving even with every breath, serving the neighbor near and far simply because love cannot help but do so: to do these is the desire of every Christian. It is also the rhythm “down deep” in every corner of creation, as the biblical writers, mystics and Martin Luther himself proclaimed.¹ The practice is not sequential, however. It is organic. Just as there “is” no God the Father without the Son and Spirit, no one without any of the others, so also proclamation never arrives without thanksgiving and service and no one of these three actions without the other. This is simply the character of the full Christian life.

The character of the Christian life depends upon the very character of God. Christians are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the eternal event of the three divine persons living with, for and through each other as the consummate expression of inexhaustible love. The love of, in and from God Trinity has no bounds. This love eternally and infinitely sends and receives itself. The flow and flux and flowering of love in God cannot be contained even in God. It is not enough for God to enjoy the love within; the love wills to create and sustain others. To know and confess that God is love, then, is to state that *diakonia* (neighborly care or service), too, is innate and integral to the character of God. *Diakonia*, too, flexes and flows and flowers. *Diakonia* within God ensures that the creation by God is respected, loved and served. The character of the full Christian life *theologically* understood reaches ever outward with care for the neighbor and all the creation. This is also part of what it means for the human being to be created in the very image of God.

Diakonia includes apostolicity

Another aspect of the Triune life is the self-giving, the “sent-ness” of the divine persons. As the very energies of God Trinity go ever beyond God to and through all that God loves, all who are sent by God are impelled by God’s essential apostolicity. As the divine persons are sent, so also are God’s children. As we are sent, so also we are charged by the same apostolicity that energized the prophets and disciples. Apostolicity belongs to the language and vocation of our baptism into Christ. A robust missional imagination, then, characterizes all who would daily live from the joy and impulse of our baptism. So this missional imagination, this apostolicity, this “sent-ness,” is integral, too, to diaconal service.

In turn, diaconal service strengthens this church’s right emphasis on evangelical mission as an en-fleshed expression of the love of God that sends and receives. God’s children-servants daily find Jesus’ promise of human fulfillment satisfied when we give ourselves away and then receive ourselves and more in return. Likewise, *diakonia* does not possess itself while it serves others. *Diakonia* is always a giving and sending of one’s self *to* the other, especially *for* and *to* the other, however and wherever the other is. Indeed, when God’s servants are sent, we carry not ourselves, but God’s strength clothed in weakness to serve precisely the weak. In this cruciform way God sends God. We who also are in and with God are sent out *to* wherever those who need God’s love through us are, *however* they are. Sent-ness and self-giving all resound with the wonderful urgency of God’s love that is always outward bound. And God’s love is urgent because of the urgency of all who are bound by suffering, those whom God loves so particularly.

Sent to serve at the cross

So we proclaim, we thank and we serve. This Christian “tri-fold rhythm” within the Triune life clearly indicates God’s character and what God intends for our life and where we find our life wanting. *Diakonia* is precisely the call to the disciple to serve because on the mortal side of eternity it denotes the practical need to fulfill that to which *Kerygma* and *Eucharistia* aspire, even as we already live in the fullness of God’s grace. At the root, in the cracks, on the edges and at the center of the daily grind everywhere and anywhere, God intends abundant and peaceful life.

¹ Marc Lienhard, “Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*. New York: Crossroad, 1988, 291ff.

This is also the meaning of the Lutheran “Theology of the Cross.” The *theologia crucis* is rooted in God’s diaconal character. God in Jesus Christ is Emmanuel with humankind in all our situations. God suffers where any suffer. Yet, despite, in and beyond suffering, God promises resurrection. Resurrection begins with God’s healing of the creation now, whenever and wherever the Gospel is received. The new life transforms into the celebration of perfect peace, justice and joy forever.

This is the presumption of every more formalized Lutheran theological theme. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit lives in intimate solidarity with every suffering person. Therefore, wherever one works to announce God’s forgiveness, to heal, to bring peace, to establish justice, to harbor hope and proclaim promise—especially at the suffering places where stands the crucified God—there one serves Christ himself and there the servant makes visible to the served the God who insistently and selflessly is with us. “Whatever you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did also to me” (Matthew 25:40). To the “least of these” and more—all in their uniqueness of spirit, time and place—the Christian in gratitude is sent and self-giving. Would that all Christians, all the church, be more evidently so diaconal.

By what authority?

So who is it who makes Christ visible so trenchantly in the suffering places and easily in the joyous places? And by what authority? All Christians are called by God to serve wherever Christ’s cross is planted. This poses a problem for the self-preserving church, that church which prefers its own maintenance over its God-given mission. To acknowledge that mission comes before self-preservation of course does not mean that there is no place for self-care. Self-care is necessary insofar as it empowers mission and it is mandated by mission. This is as true for healthy institutional forms as it is for individual persons. But God’s desire that all are to serve poses also a freeing possibility for the church more to be “a church for others.” When Jesus asked us to follow him, he did not provide rubrics and caveats as to who is or is not qualified to serve. In the ultimate sense, personal or learned qualifications have nothing to do with the matter. Only Christ’s grace and Christ’s call matter. Whomever Christ graces, Christ calls; and all whom Christ calls Christ graces: all whom Christ has called to serve and all who have heard that call have been given the gifts to love, serve, heal, forgive, proclaim; to be and to present Christ himself.

Christ’s call to serve is the Christian mandate and Christ himself the final authority. If we do not love and follow in response, without condition, it is only because we have not yet or again not heard. All Christians are called to bring their and God’s joy to every place of suffering and shame, the cruciform places, whereby the God who bears the pain of our darkness will be revealed as the God of greater light. God’s light overcomes the darkness and perfect love casts out all fear. The authority to serve and “be” Christ is the authority of God’s own creative life-giving love uttered as the call for those who love God to love all others: daily, randomly, regularly, systematically and even institutionally.

It is the tragic truth, though, that only the naïve and innocent can love and serve with pure abandon. Even then, those who are served by love need service that is appropriate to their circumstances. They need a knowing love and response-able service. Because of sin, “our age-old rebellion,” none really are innocent, and love in service to the neighbor must therefore be all the more enabled by God’s grace and resourced by human wisdom. Thus the church through the ages has rightly not only organized and re-organized itself to serve the neighbor, but has educated and re-educated itself on how best so to do given the challenges of its ever changing contexts. At various times in the life of the church, the degree of dramatic change in the cultural context has called for urgent and dramatic re-shaping of the church’s witness and service. For such a time, that for which the church stands and its public means for doing so need to be clear, simple and coherent with its own and the Great Tradition. The church’s convictions and the ways by which the convictions are expressed also must be adequate to the needs of the newly urgent time.

To serve in *this* time

This is such a time. Technologized globalization has brought the neighbor from afar to within our daily consciousness. She with her hijab and he with his aggressive secularity, yet both and all previously “others” appear to us as more regularly gracious and surprisingly “human” than stereotypes entertain. Today the parable of the Good Samaritan is far less an abstraction from another distant culture and far more a daily opportunity for concrete neighborliness. Close friends and real faces speaking from what only a generation ago were unknown value systems make real for us the challenges and opportunities of postmodernity: that there is no longer a “universally accepted” religious disposition or common story, but only one massive and diverse public market wherein values, meanings and commodities all are the stuff of campaigns to buy and vote.

To compound the challenge of this popular philosophical shift that has introduced the Areopagus (Acts 17:22ff) to this digitized day with even more pluralism than recognized by St. Paul, the literature of the educated “millennial” generation today redounds with nihilism and insignificance. Given the dour and connected global economy, as well as the over-abundance of “options” for self-meaning construction (from a surplus of fundamentalisms to a surplus of mere metaphors), life for too many today is experienced as if the presence of so much means the endurance and eternal meaning of nothing. How shall Christianity answer this but by way of beginning again with what only has “worked” in every previous urgent time: gospel-inspired acts of simple love that bring healing and comfort to the needy, the *diakonia* which for St. Francis was the preferred mode of proclamation? Postmodernity, religious and philosophical pluralism, multiculturalism, globalism, the complexification of life: all call for clearer and simpler forms (offices) of modeling service that can be understood more readily within and beyond the church.

The complexities of this post-modern time notwithstanding, there is clear understanding and even surprising agreement within and beyond the church as to what the office of “pastor” means. For Lutherans, this is expressed in the ordained Ministry of Word and Sacrament and is given its “constitutional” basis in the Augsburg Confession, particularly Articles 5 and 7. While the role of pastor through the ages has, of course, borne the character of *diakonia*, it is fair to say that the pastoral office by design emphasizes much more the formal presentation of *kerygma* and *eucharistia*.

There has not been such a clear understanding of *diakonia/service*, however, as a public office in the Lutheran tradition. While there is no explicit commendation for a ministry of service in the early Lutheran movement, Luther and the reformers did not shrink from advocating faith active in love to neighbor. Indeed, one can argue forcefully that much of Luther’s energy for reform was driven precisely because the current practice of the church hierarchy inhibited the active love of neighbor precisely. In turn, this inhibition was and is the child of anxious selves; as Luther diagnosed it, salvation by “works” was so overwhelmingly burdensome to the individual conscience that one was never free from insecurity about one’s own future.

But once faith was freed from this errant church system, on which most reforming energy was necessarily spent, Luther could see nothing more natural and right than a Christian serving one’s neighbor. Put otherwise, Luther could not even imagine the “humanity” of anyone who would not care for his or her neighbor, even when directly threatened by a plague.² Luther did occasionally advocate for a formal diaconate to aid the poor, as well as to free priests of “the burden of temporal matters.” But any following of his encouragement was as sporadic as the counsel itself.³ Faith freed so to be active in love for neighbor and world was the Lutheran movement’s first goal. If focus was therefore more necessary on a clerical restructure so that evangelical preaching and care could abound, faith with reason (!) would find its own way to love the neighbor.

Very early with the Reformation, Lutheran ministry also became defined by two German words, *Pfarrer* (which primarily meant pastor-preacher) and then also by *Dienst* (service), which provided the content of the office (*Amt*). The two ways of seeing the one renewed reality of the ministerial office perhaps already showed, too, that it was difficult to distinguish public neighbor-care from the priestly liturgical role. In other Protestant experiments, as with John Calvin’s project in Geneva, ministry was more explicated to include a formal role for *diakonia*. With Lutheranism, sometimes the pastoral office has assumed the role of service (mostly as circumstances demanded). The absence of a formalized public order for *diakonia* was noted and corrected in the work of pioneers like Theodore and Fredericke Fliedner in Kaiserwerth, Johannes Wichern in Hamburg, and Wilhelm Loehe in Neuendettelsau, all in Germany in the early 19th century. Deacons and deaconesses have a wonderful, though largely underappreciated, presence in Lutheranism since then, thanks especially to the founding work of John Passavant and Sister Elizabeth Fedde, among many others.⁴ The ordained office of deacon belongs to the order of other Christian traditions, as with, for example, in the Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Icelandic Lutheran churches. It is noteworthy, too, that ecumenical full-communion partners have instituted the ordained diaconate. For the ELCA today, 20 years of Diaconal Ministers, along with the longer lived numbers of Associates in Ministry and the Deaconess communities, have demonstrated a growing, significant, but still small part of the public office representation of *diakonia*. These stand alongside and within the excellent many

² “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague (1527),” Luther’s Works, 43: 119-38.

³ “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” (1520), Luther’s Works, 36: 11-57.

⁴ For an excellent overview of the topic, see Susan Wilds McArver, “A History of the Diaconate,” in Duane Larson (ed.), *From Word and Sacrament, Renewed Vision for Diaconal Ministry* (ELCA, 1999).

institutional ways that service to and for the neighbor has been carried forward, as with hospitals, rehabilitative and convalescent services, homeless shelters, orphanages and the outstanding ministries of Lutheran Social Services.

Making it more “personal” and re-formed

These are all celebrated and needed forms of *diakonia*. They must be sustained and prospered. But they also, perhaps with some irony, do not convey the immediacy and *integral* necessity of service within the trifold rhythm of full Christian life. They are not even necessarily visible as acts from and within our congregational centers of Christian life. Too often they can be regarded only as para-church agencies deserving of a congregation’s financial support (to be sure!), though not necessarily expressive of one’s “personal” stake in their missions. How might we better model, honor and grow the daily life of the Christian with fulsome proclamation-praise-service? And—surely also an important matter—how might we honor and grow those already in the ELCA who serve in roles of *diakonia*, the unification of whom can mean more common and effective witness/service for them and a clearer, even evocative, opportunity of formal service for others in discernment about their own vocational futures?

The very nature of the church’s mission, those already who serve formally in diaconal ministries in the ELCA and “the times” suggest that this church would do well to clarify and make more compelling the ways by which we serve the needs of God’s world, always for *this* day. We are also free to do so in whatever ways prove adequate, as the history of the church has shown, even on “ad hoc” bases, as the circumstances of *diakonia*’s formalization in Acts 6 show. Beyond ensuring that the word is properly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered by way of the ordained ministry to word and sacrament, the church must and is free to arrange its other ministries as best fits the day, as best evokes response in daily vocations and as best sets example for how all the baptized can fulfill our vocations. There is nothing more theologically and confessionally right to do than this, if even the role of *diakonia* is less explicitly addressed in our confessions than in our theological premises.

There is enspirited genius already in the “constitution” of the Lutheran movement to be so. AC 5, 6, 7 and 28 taken as a group call for the gospel to be proclaimed and structures freely adopted to serve the gospel’s advance. We infer, with the vast majority of the tradition, that so we may proclaim the gospel more robustly and serve the neighbor, we are free to adopt new structures and ways of “performing” faith-freed-to-love that neither subtracts from what is essential to our confession nor adds new essentials to it. We seek rather to perform our catholic faith with our ever-reforming Lutheran attitude. Indeed, we believe on theological grounds that we best “perform” God’s character—that is, practice faithful discipleship—by sharpening the shape and emphasizing the content of public diaconal ministry.

Many write today about what is required for the church’s renewal. This is not a new practice. All church history is composed of new voices singing variations on one song and of what happens when the song becomes unrecognizable. Sometimes creativity for its own sake turns the ear away, particularly when what is familiar and loved is not honored. Sometimes ancient and not so ancient rote does the same with what may be very familiar, but appears to have no bearing on one’s present personal and public life. This inevitable dynamic of history is recognized and respected by the Lutheran movement’s principle of *semper reformanda*, always reforming. We reform freely so to be true both to the Gospel and to present ears, eyes, mouths: all persons and all senses, wholly. We change—which is to reaffirm daily, for *this* day our baptismal covenant—so to perform our faith expressly for this day like no other day. We change to address and love this day because we really do want to face head-on “wearied religions” and a “wearied planet” and because we believe “God does not heal without human hands.”⁵ We believe down deep in our life in God that we are meant for neighbor-service, *diakonia*. And we need servants who are both neighbor-servants and exemplars, hands-on diaconal coaches to be with us and all fellow-sufferers wherever we are on the daily journey. For today, this age-old expression of Christian service may indeed look like something wholly in keeping with our history and yet emergent with a new vigor and face for this day.

Conclusion

We believe that the world, as well as this church, would be better served were a new unified diaconal ministry to stand alongside the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. It would be a ministry that is “flexible enough to offer a wide range

⁵ See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion, The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2012) 239.

of ministries and models for supporting the baptized in daily life.”⁶ Such a diaconal ministry is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related and missionally driven. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lives from a theological foundation that allows for a Ministry of Word and Service. More significantly, this foundation and the trajectory it has propelled in the ELCA’s young life commend that we adopt and adapt such a ministry for the empowering of all who proclaim, give thanks and serve as the right rhythm of our life together in God.

The text authored by the Rev. Duane H. Larson was adopted by the Word and Service Task Force.

⁶ Stephen P. Bouman, *From the Parish for the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 219.

Here a Deacon, There a Deacon, Everywhere a Deacon, Deacon

A Brief Sampling of Current Uses of the Role/Title “Deacon” in the ELCA and Beyond
Bishop Bill Gafkjen on behalf of the Transition & Communication Sub-Group + July 2014

This document was prepared for internal use in support of the work of the ELCA Word and Service Ministry Task Force. Three intentions shape its content: (1) to briefly explore current uses of the term "deacon" in ELCA contexts, (2) to similarly explore current uses of the term in ecumenical, especially full communion partner, contexts, and (3) to provide a descriptive paragraph that highlights the distinctive characteristics of Rostered Deacons of the ELCA in reference to those uses and contexts.

A cursory exploration of synodical documents and congregational websites accompanied by conversation with a variety of folks across the church suggests that the word, title and role of deacon is alive and well in the life of the church, albeit in a wide variety of expressions and tasks. The forms and levels of training and formation, as well as public or ecclesial recognition of this ministry, also vary greatly, from local/congregational to synodical, from informal recognition to a freestanding graduation ceremony, from volunteer service to churchwide rostering. The rites of initiation also vary. What follows is a small, simple sampling, not an exhaustive list, either in breadth or depth.

ELCA Local, Synod and Churchwide

ELCA Deaconess. As a consecrated roster of the ELCA, “the Deaconess Community consists of theologically trained, professionally prepared women, called to ministry and service by congregations and synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.” Theological training of ELCA Deaconesses typically includes a Masters of Arts in Religion or similar degree. Deaconesses are engaged in intentional community with one another, are professionally trained for particular vocations, and serve under call from a congregation, synod council, ELCA Church Council.

ELCA Diaconal Minister. As a consecrated roster of the ELCA, diaconal ministers offer a ministry of word and service, sharing the hope of Christ, helping where there is need, and equipping others for healing and justice in the world. Diaconal ministers hold a theological Masters Degree and training or degree work in a professionally focused area. Diaconal ministers serve under call through agencies, institutions, synod councils and traditional church programs as they build bridges between the church and the world.

Synodical or Parish Deacon. A number of ELCA synods have established some form of synodical deacon (e.g. Metro New York, Upper New York, Florida Bahamas, Metro Chicago). In most cases, synodical deacons are trained through a two-year program of study and formation (usually using an extra-synodical program like Diakonia; see description below). After completion of the course, participants are considered for certification by synod leadership and serve in congregations, most often their home congregation, engaging particular tasks under supervision and in partnership with the congregation’s pastor. In most cases, the deacon’s term of service is coterminous with that of the congregation’s pastor. In some synods such deacons may serve on behalf of synod leadership at the conference or synodical level, primarily engaged in administration and non-sacramental ministry (e.g. preaching, liturgical leadership) for and with congregations. Most such deacons serve either as volunteers or under contract with a small stipend.

Congregational Deacon. Some ELCA congregations use the term “deacon” to indicate all elected members of the congregation’s leadership council. In other congregations deacons are specific congregation council members who are tasked primarily with some aspect of the administration of the congregation or worship leadership. Some congregations use the term deacon for those lay people (whether elected or not) who assist in leading worship at or around the Table in some way (e.g. assisting ministers, communion servers, etc.). While some of these folks might receive training in partnership with other congregations, most are elected or appointed, trained and installed by and for the local congregation.

Independent Lutheran Organizations

Lutheran Deaconess Association (LDA) Deaconess/Deacon. A pan-Lutheran organization located in Valparaiso, Ind., the LDA says that it “prepares women and men for ministries of service to those in need in the church and world, supports deaconesses and deacons in their various ministries, affirms the whole people of God in their own diaconal service and assists the church in its diaconal mission.” Upon completion of a non-degree program of coursework, community life, internship and formation, LDA deaconesses and deacons (a recent addition) are consecrated by the LDA community for their ministry in the world, which may occur through formalized call, employment, volunteer ministry or in daily life. Those who are members of the ELCA and desire to be rostered typically also move through candidacy for commissioning as an associate in ministry or consecration as a diaconal minister.

Diakonia Program. Operating in one form or another and through various relationships with a number of synods and their leadership, the independent Diakonia program describes itself as “a two-year process of spiritual formation and theological education for baptized members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or anyone wishing in good faith to study these teachings. . .to provide each participant the opportunity to discover their God-given gifts, strengthen their faith and their abilities, and give them purpose within their own congregations, synods and the church-wide body of Christ.” Some synods use this program as the primary locus of education and formation for synodical deacons. Others in which the program operates do not have a formal relationship with it and most graduates (who sometimes call themselves deacon or deaconess) do not move through a process of synodical or other recognition for more public ministry. Rather, in these situations they either serve on a volunteer basis in their home congregations or simply continue to grow in their own daily discipleship.

Whatever the particular role or context, on the whole those who bear the title or role of deacon in the ELCA carry responsibility for some form of service ministry. Some also proclaim the word through preaching and teaching in local settings. Very few deacons or deaconesses preside at Holy Communion or Holy Baptism, and then only under episcopal authorization. Many also carry the stated responsibility to empower, equip and encourage the whole people of God for their own daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation.

Deacon of the ELCA. This last responsibility of deacons, to empower and equip others, is a keystone for the emerging ministry of deacons of the ELCA. Whatever their particular role or context – whether deeply engaged in proclamation and service in non-ecclesial contexts or serving in congregational or other “church” settings – every deacon of the ELCA has a two-fold focus to serve the neighbor and to empower, equip and encourage the people of God for their daily baptismal vocation of service to the neighbor and care of creation. This ministry is understood to be distinct from, alongside and in mutual complementarity with the ministries of pastors of the ELCA. Consequently, the “new” unified roster of deacons of the ELCA consists of those who have been identified, formed, trained, called and consecrated for ministries of word and service throughout the whole church through locally stewarded churchwide processes. Deacons of the ELCA are supported by and accountable to churchwide standards and commitments as well as the synodical and local accountabilities and support of the ministries they serve. Deacons of the ELCA have responsibility and opportunity for engagement in broader ecumenical ministerial and ecclesial relationships. Unlike all other “non-rostered” deacons in ELCA settings, the ministry and rostering of deacons of the ELCA may be recognized and transferred across synods and institutions.

Deacons in a Troika of Ecumenical Full Communion Contexts

Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church has two formally defined orders of deacon: Transitional deacons and those whose lifelong call is to serve as deacon. The former, transitional deacons, are those who are preparing for ordination to “the presbyterate,” or priesthood. The latter are more relevant to this discussion.

It is difficult to find a clear, universally applicable description of the role of ordained deacons in the Episcopal Church. This is due, in part, to the responsibility of each diocese to shape this role (and preparation for it) according to its needs. Nevertheless, there are some common foundations.

For example, the Canon to the Ordinary¹ of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis characterizes the role of deacons this way: “The mission of the deacon is to be a holy person who walks out of the church to deeply encounter the world at large, and then walks back in to explain to those inside what was discovered. The lay people and priests are seen more as the evangelists to the world, while the deacon is the conscience of the church, reminding us of our role as servants to those outside the doors.”

Each diocese determines its own requirements for the formation and education of deacons. The most common current practice today is for deacons to be trained within the diocese over a multi-year period using volunteer instructors (both ordained and lay people), meeting on weekends and evenings.

Although deacons are not compensated for their ministry, they are considered clergy, voting in conventions as clergy, filling clergy positions on boards and commissions that have defined clergy and lay seats, being accountable to all clergy disciplinary canons. They are expected to dress when on duty in a clerical collar and to vest as a deacon at worship. Only priests and bishops can offer sacramental blessings and consecrate the elements of the Eucharist, but deacons are supposed to have the first priority over other clergy in reading the gospel at a Eucharist, and also offer the dismissal at the end. By rubrics deacons are supposed to offer the prayers of the people, but in practice many congregations prefer that a layperson offer the prayers. Otherwise, deacons are not supposed to take strong leadership roles in congregations except in social justice/outreach ministries.

The Episcopal canons dictate that once a deacon has been ordained “the Bishop, after consultation with the Deacon and the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight, may assign a Deacon to one or more congregations, other communities of faith or non-parochial ministries. Deacons assigned to a congregation or other community of faith act under the authority of the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight in all matters concerning the congregation.”

Presbyterian Church – USA. Following the development of Reformed ecclesiology, the Presbyterian Church – USA ordains persons to three ordered ministries: ministers, elders and deacons. These three ministries represent two ecclesial functions: ministries of the word performed by presbyters (pastors and elders) and ministries of service performed by deacons. Deacons are elected and ordained by and serve in a local congregation for particular, renewal terms as part of a board of deacons or as individual deacons elected to particular positions of responsibility. They lead the local church in its ministries of compassion (distributing aid, caring directly for the poor, the sick, refugees and prisoners) and justice (working for equity in society). Deacons often also assume other duties as assigned by the congregation’s session (council), including worship responsibilities like assisting with Holy Communion. Many deacons are also tasked with care of congregational members and their particular needs or work with new member welcome and incorporation.

According to the denomination’s *Book of Order*, once deacons are ordained, they remain ordained even if not currently serving on the congregation’s session or board of deacons. In fact, they remain so as long as they are active members of any congregation of the denomination, unless and until the ordination is revoked through disciplinary or other formal measures.

United Methodist Church. The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* (paragraph 303.2) says that “Men and women who respond to God’s call to lead in service and to equip others for this ministry through teaching proclamation, and worship and who assist elders² in the administration of the sacraments are ordained deacon.” Deacons are said to be called by God, authorized by the church and ordained by a bishop to a lifelong public ministry of word and service. This is expressed in teaching and proclaiming the word and assisting elders in administration of (but not presiding at) baptism and eucharist in worship, forming and nurturing disciples, conducting marriages and funerals, and both serving in the world and creating opportunities for other disciples to become aware of and to address the needs and hopes of the world.

United Methodist deacons may work primarily in congregations or they may work primarily in settings like hospitals, social service agencies, etc. When a deacon serves in a setting beyond the local congregation, such a deacon is to be given a “secondary” appointment by her or his bishop to a congregation where they “take missional responsibility for leading other Christians into ministries of service.” In rare and carefully defined situations, a deacon may or may not be authorized by the bishop to preside at Holy Communion in the absence of an elder.

¹ Similar to a synodical Assistant to the Bishop in the ELCA.

² United Methodist elders correlate, essentially, to ELCA pastors.

United Methodist Deacons are categorized as clergy. In addition to engaging a candidacy process, all deacons, like all elders, are required to complete a minimum of 24 semester hours of theological education at an approved seminary. This may or may not be part of a degree program.

The United Methodist Church once consecrated Diaconal Ministers, but no longer consecrates new ones. Diaconal ministers were understood to be laypeople who lead in service ministries. This lay ministry now falls under the church's office of home missionaries and deaconesses.

Finally, A Brief Word About the Word Deacon and Gender

It is interesting to note that in nearly all of the above usages of the term "deacon," the word is used in a non-gender specific manner. In other words, "deacon" refers to both men and women who serve in that office. The most common exceptions appear to be where there are established communities that consist primarily or exclusively of women. In those cases, the term "deaconess" is used for women and, as in the case of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, "deacon" is employed for men as they have recently been added to the community. This appears to be the case, on the whole, across traditions, with some exceptions, of course.

The non-gender specific use of the term deacon appears to be the most common norm over time and geography. This practice appears to follow that of the apostle Paul, who, for example, does not use a feminine form in referring to "our sister Phoebe, a deacon [diakonon] of the church" in Romans 16:1.

It is also of interest to note that in many aspects of contemporary North American life, the use of feminine forms (which are sometimes referred to in linguistic literature as "diminutives") of many titles or roles has begun to disappear or to even be regarded as inappropriate. For example, those who travel by air are no longer tended to by "stewards" and "stewardesses," but by "flight attendants." Note also the increasingly frequent transition in public discourse from the use of "actor/actress" to "actor" and from "waiter/waitress" to "server."

Consequently, as it carries this consistent, persistent biblical, historical, ecclesial connection with the sort of servant (diakonia) ministry engaged by those who hold this office, the term "deacon" appears most appropriate for contemporary usage with a new unified roster of ministers of Word and Service in the ELCA which will include women and men alike. Use of the term and title "deaconess" will likely continue for those who have used it in the past and may also be used by some women who enter this roster in the future. This need not be cause for conflict or correction, but, rather, may be honored as yet another expression of the rich diversity of life and ministry in the Spirit and opportunity for conversation and clarity about this important role in the life of the church.

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A smattering of documents and sources consulted:

Colleagues in judicatory offices of full-communion denominations

Constitution and Canons, Episcopal Church -

<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/648>

diakonia – <http://www.thediakoniaprogram.org>

ELCA Candidacy Manual and other documents –

<http://www.elca.org/en/Our-Work/Leadership/Vocation-Become-a-Leader/Lay-Rosters>

Episcopal Diocese of Kansas –

http://www.episcopal-ks.org/resources/documents/Deacon_guidelines_2008.pdf

Lutheran Deaconess Association members and website – <http://www.thelda.org>

Upstate New York Synod, ELCA –

http://upstatenysynod.org/download/deacons/Brief_Guide_for_Pastors_2-13.pdf

Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church, USA –
<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/ministers/ordination/>

The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide by Earl S. Johnson, Jr.

United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry – <http://www.gbhem.org/clergy/deacons>