

## “DEACON’S DIALOGUE” - The Ven. Gary Brown, Archdeacon

The decade of the Seventies was a time of significant transition for the diaconate. Based in part on changes arising from the Vatican II modernization of the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church began exploring a different way of looking at the order of deacons. Vatican II restored the permanent diaconate as a separate order, one that did not constitute a stepping-stone to the priesthood. Although the Episcopal Church had been evolving in the same direction, that is restoring a permanent diaconate, first through the creation of Missionary and Indigent deacons, then adding the Deaconess role, and perpetual deacons post WWII, in 1970 those previous waves came to an end and the groundwork for a restored but modern vocational diaconate was laid. This work would culminate with the publication of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, which contains the current rite for ordination as a deacon in our Church. The time between 1970 and the somewhat controversial publication of the 1979 BCP was a time of revision and change for the diaconate, constituting the Fourth “Wave” of diaconal evolution.

However, publication of the “new” BCP did not end the evolution of the diaconate within the Episcopal Church. This Fourth Wave was a time of transition, especially for the deaconesses, whose order was absorbed into the order of deacons. For some deaconesses, this was a substantial loss of the identity, which they had known for many years. There were a number of issues to be resolved: “a need to clarify the theology of the diaconate and to explore new and creative uses in roles other than parish assistant; a need for national guidelines, with local adaptations, for the training of deacons; a need for a national organization for deacons; the concern about disenfranchisement in national and diocesan conventions if deacons had no vote or representation; a need for deacon representation on boards, councils, and programs of the church; the relationship between seminaries and the diaconate.” (Watson Epting, pp. 24,25)

Prior to having their order absorbed into the “new” deacon position, deaconesses were primarily teachers, nurses, and workers in institutions for providing social services. Now they were being integrated into a larger role, and asked to provide assistance with the liturgy. Conversely, the other group affected by the new definition of the diaconate, the perpetual deacons, had primarily been liturgically focused. Both groups were abolished as separate orders and the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, through its Ordination Vows of a deacon and through liturgical rubrics, combined in a sense both orders into one with the addition of other expectations and guidelines. And to thoroughly confuse the meaning of being a deacon, the Transitional Deacon was retained as a step to the priesthood.

Renewing the diaconate in this manner led to some negative responses from not only the deaconesses and permanent deacons, but from the priesthood. Many saw the newly defined deacon as usurping the role of the laity, with tasks reserved to the deacon, which had sometimes formerly been done by laypersons. Other priests resented having roles previously filled by the priest, such as proclaiming the gospel, become the purview of the deacon (if one is present).

Having talked with, read about and seen deacons who were an early part of the post-1979 renewal, I have to say that I think the problem was exacerbated by a strong focus on the liturgical role by many of those early vocational deacons. On the one hand, they often had to remind their priest colleagues that some things were now reserved to the deacon by the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer; on the other hand, they did not always do their part to try and enter into a collegial relationship in order to work out these issues, but instead demanded their “right” to perform specific tasks according to the 1979 Prayer Book. Some priests had been used to a role in which they were seen as sole decision maker and the only local clergy by the congregation, and were not themselves very amenable to collegial ways of working. At any rate, in my relatively short time as a deacon, I have seen a positive change in the way priests and deacons work together. The deacon’s role is generally seen as more focused on being a bridge between the world and the Church, and priests who were trained since the renewal of the diaconate accept deacons as a legitimate part of the clergy team.

Last month I wrote about the Love in Nevada County (LiNC) project, which several of the churches in our community are doing as a bridge from the churches to the rest of the community. I would request that you all consider what Emmanuel might do as our project to somehow serve the community on April 27, perhaps through helping needy individuals, assisting a local nonprofit that provides services to the less fortunate, or whatever need you are aware of locally. Please let me know if you have ideas for serving and/or if you are interested in joining us.

This is a small example of what it means to be a “bridge between the church and the world,” and helps all of us fulfill our baptismal covenant to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” It is also an opportunity to demonstrate by example the Good News of God in Christ to the members of our larger community.

Peace and Love to all, ~Deacon Gary~