



The Diaconate - Frequently Asked Questions

What is the diaconate?

The diaconate (from the Greek word *diakonía*, meaning servanthood, or literally “through the dust”) is the order of ministry to which deacons belong. From the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Anglican Church differed from Protestant Churches by retaining a threefold order of ordained ministers: bishops, priests, and deacons.

Aren't deacons just apprenticing for their real role as priests?

It is true that for many years, Anglicans have mostly experienced deacons as “first-year curates,” who are headed toward ordination as a priest, and most often, towards parish ministry or chaplaincy. We now refer to these individuals as “deacons in transition.” However, over the past 50 years or so, the Church has begun to recover its sense of the diaconate as a “full, equal, and distinct” order of ministry, with a unique and essential contribution to make to the Church and its ministry to God’s world. In other words, we are beginning to experience deacons whose fundamental calling is to the diaconate, not the priesthood.

What's the difference between a priest and a deacon?

In the simplest possible terms, a priest is called to minister to the *gathered* Christian community. Typically, a priest’s primary ministry is focused on the worship, education and pastoral care of the Church, and most often, the Church pays the priest to fulfil this calling. A deacon’s ministry to the Church is quite different. Typically, deacons exercise their principal ministry in “the world,” along with the rest of the “*scattered*” Christian community. They are employed, paid by, and accountable to agencies other than the Church. Their role in the Church is normally voluntary and part time. They are to be a compelling example of service, justice and advocacy, and to call and equip and lead all the baptised to go and do likewise.

Deacons inhabit the ragged edge between the Church and world, interpreting one to the other, making their home in neither and both. They are, as the ordinal says, to “interpret the needs, concerns and hopes of the world to the Church.”

How do you become a deacon?

Ordained ministry is a demanding and sacred vocation. Those who have been encouraged to consider the diaconate, or who may themselves feel called to this ministry, should be in touch first with their parish priest, who can explain the process of vocational discernment and preparation for diaconal ministry. Generally, the process of discernment takes place over several months, and is a carefully guided opportunity for the inquirer, their parish, and other wise and experienced mentors to explore whether there is a mutually beneficial “fit”.

All deacons are required to engage in appropriate education and training, and an agreed program of study and practice is tailored to the needs of each individual, including the need to remain in gainful employment during the period of study.

The Church is looking for deacons who embody diaconal character, passion, and ability in their daily lives, and whom it can trust to provide it challenging, effective and respectful leadership. Those who are chosen to become deacons after this period of discernment and formation are ordained by the bishop, and anchored in a worshipping community that seeks diaconal leadership.

What does a deacon actually do?

Deacons' most important work is their "diaconal ministry" in the world (perhaps as a mental health care worker, a politician, an environmentalist, or what have you.) Even once ordained, this is where they will spend most of their time.

Their work with the Church stems from their work in the world.

1. First, they are by definition to be a compelling example to their parishioners of how the Church can engage in the work of mending God's world (or building the kingdom of God).
2. Second, their work experience allows them to bring knowledgeable information back to the Church about the "needs, concerns and hopes of the world." Through the lens of the gospel, they interpret what they see and hear, and challenge the Church to respond. This they do through teaching and preaching, and by putting some teeth in our normally vague intercessory prayers. By same token, the deacon is often in a position to bring the support of the Church to situations of need, suffering or injustice, and to bring a word of hope.
3. Third, deacons equip their worshipping community to identify and respond the needs around them, both as a group (parish-based projects), and as individuals in their own places of ministry. A robust approach to mission includes all of: education, hands-on ministry, advocacy, financial support, and prayer.
4. Fourth, deacons have a symbolic role in the liturgy, undertaking tasks that highlight the whole Church's calling to servant leadership. In other words, we don't ordain deacons so we'll have someone to read the gospel, or dismiss the people. Quite the opposite! Deacons read the gospel and dismiss the people because we ordain them: in doing so, we have declared our need to be reminded visually and ritually that we are all called to *diakonía*.

Where can I learn more?

Please feel free to be in touch with the diocesan Director of Deacons, currently the Very Reverend M. Ansley Tucker, at atucker@bc.anglican.ca, or 250.386.7781.

Two useful websites are:

- Anglican Deacons Canada (ADC): www.anglicandeacons.ca
- The Association for Episcopal Deacons (AED): www.episcopaldeacons.org

Recommended Reading

Barnett, James M. *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*. New York: Seabury, 1981.

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