

The Diaconate and Diakonia-ecumenical convergence and practice.

The three main tasks of God's church have sometimes been defined as leiturgia or worship, martyria (witness) and diakonia (service, particularly of the poor and marginalised). Much attention has been given ecumenically to worship, particularly in terms of its twin nodal points, the Word and the sacrament of the eucharist. Desire for common witness to the non-Christian world was at the very heart of the international Missionary Conference of 1910, which marked the beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement as known today. Rather less attention was given to the specific nature of diakonia until more recent years even though the early Life and Work movement, with its two great inter-war conferences, certainly encouraged growth in unity through experience of common service and witness on social justice.

Much more recently, fruitful attention has been given to the nature of the Church's diakonia in a needy world and, in particular to the ministry of deacons within that context. There has, as I hope to show, been an extraordinary degree of convergence on the fact that the ministry of deacons is to focus, enable and encourage the wider ministry of all the people of God in such works of mercy, compassion and service of the poor as they may be enabled to perform within their local context and, in some cases, more widely beyond it. In some respects the co-operation of those in various forms of diaconal ministry across the ecumenical spectrum has been helped by the fact that the thorny question of the validity of orders does not impede sharing by deacons to the same extent as is the case for presbyteral or episcopal ministries. While it is true that former Anglican or Protestant deacons wishing to serve in the Roman Catholic diaconate would have to be re-ordained, there is relatively little that they do that cannot also be done by layfolk suitably approved. The sacrament of baptism can be conferred by a lay person. In Roman Catholic theology, it is the spouses who minister the sacrament of marriage to each other, the priest or deacon witness being only such, even if his presence is required by canons. Preaching in both the Anglican and Protestant churches can be done by duly licensed lay preachers.

Why has there been, more recently, so much more discussion ecumenically of diaconal ministry as represented and focussed by those set aside and commissioned/ordained by churches for facilitating that aspect of their mission in the world? There are, I think two reasons, the first relating to the need of the Church to connect with the concerns of the world and to carry on the healing, caring and compassionate ministry of Christ in a rapidly changing and needy world. The other relates to the growing ecumenical awareness of the extraordinary way in which the ministry of deacons has developed and, for long periods, has been rather neglected and eclipsed, particularly in the western Church, thus harming its ability to understand and relate meaningfully to the needs of the world¹.

¹ The diaconate continued to have considerable liturgical significance in the East, particularly in presenting the prayers of the people and administering the holy gifts. Women deacons were also ordained up till the twelfth century. McGuckin, J.A. *The Orthodox Church* (2011), pp326-7, 332. Readers will note I have made little

For the first, we can begin, as in exploring so many ecumenical issues, with the teaching and changes introduced by Vatican II in the Roman Catholic Church. *Gaudium et Spes* stressed the need of the Church to relate to the joys and dilemmas of the human race. It built, of course, on earlier fruitful Catholic teaching in the realm of social justice and on a long tradition of involvement in caritative work by Catholic lay associations such as the Legion of Mary and Catholic Action. The need for an active lay apostolate, both in helping to form what Pope Francis memorably calls *missionary disciples* and in caritative action, was recognised before Vatican II even though the Council gave such work a boost by emphasising more strongly than at any time since the patristic period the active role of the laity, both in worship as the royal priesthood of all the faithful, and, outside the Church building, in serving neighbours in the name of Christ.

Other churches were also becoming more aware of the need for the laity to be more actively involved, not simply in such ancillary roles as acting as assistants at certain points in worship (serving holy communion, leaders of intercessions and so on) or in taking responsibility for the maintenance of church finances or property. Emphasis was placed on the role of the laity in the world, on their need to exemplify Christian attitudes and service in the way they carried out their daily work and of their need as Christian citizens to contribute to the formation and advocacy of policies that contributed to the common good. In British Methodism the Christian Citizenship Department under its secretary Edward Rogers, set very high standards of leadership in the fifties and sixties. In 1988, British Methodism set out much of its experience and its hopes in the document *The Ministry of the Whole People of God*, relating to mutual ministry both within the local congregation and witness in the wider community².

It scarcely needs to be added that pontiffs subsequent to Vatican II continued to stress the need for a laity active in all three spheres of the Church's life. John Paul II issued *Christifideles Laici*. Pope Francis has, in a way, crowned the whole process with both his magnificent *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) and his stress on the Year of Mercy, calling all Christians to renew their relationship with Jesus Christ and experience the joy of ministering in his name as missionary disciples and people of spirit in whatever vocation may be theirs, acting as salt, light and yeast in their spheres of activity, professional or voluntary. I suspect *Evangelii Gaudium* has had more effect on Christendom in general (not just the Roman Catholic Church) than any previous papal teaching document. It is easy for the rest of us to hear the same voice we hear in our own founders and fathers; certainly Francis shares with the Wesleys 'the trumpet voice on all the world to call' and the ability to point out what are the priorities for those called to 'serve the present age'³.

reference to the eastern Christian traditions, Orthodox, Oriental and Catholic in this article as I have little knowledge of any developments in diaconal ministry comparable to those current in the western churches. I hope eastern friends will forgive me my ignorance and resulting omission!

² *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, vol 2 (2000), (1984-2000) Part 1, pp. 195-281.

³ From two of Charles Wesley's best known hymns, still popular in Methodism today.

All churches accept that the ministry of deacons existed in New Testament times. Paul greets the bishops and deacons at the beginning of Philippians. The pastoral epistles mention the qualities they should have. Almost all Christians assume that the ministry began with the appointment of the seven in Acts 6 as assistants to the apostles in serving the needs of Greek speaking Christians who felt neglected by the Aramaic speaking leaders of the Church. It has always been assumed their duties were essentially caritative, looking after the needs of the widows. However, it can and has been argued, that this interpretation reads a certain amount into the situation that is not entirely clear from the text. First, the term deacon is not as such actually used in Acts 6 nor, as a Catholic deacon friend of mine points out, is it entirely clear that their function was more caritative than in teaching; certainly some of the deacons, such as Philip and Stephen, seem to have been more involved in sharing the work of proclamation and preaching as shown in the following chapters of Acts⁴. Nevertheless, it is clear that from the time of Irenaeus, the early fathers accepted that the seven appointed by the apostles on the recommendation of the Church in general were deacons, an interpretation disputed neither at the schism of east and west nor at the Reformation⁵.

Considerable research has been done into the diaconate over the period from the beginning of the second century. St Ignatius of Antioch mentions deacons frequently and has a very high respect for them as living icons of Jesus Christ. He states that when they visit the sick it is Christ Himself who visits. The deacon is a 'real presence of Christ' and 'also an executive in the Church of God'. The latter point relates to the very considerable influence and authority they had, as right hand men for the bishops in the distribution of charity to the poor. This was a very major responsibility in the church of Rome and both Leo the Great and Gregory the Great were promoted to be bishops of Rome straight from the diaconate⁶.

The Australian scholar, John Collins, has pointed out that the term diakonos is applied to men with high responsibility and should certainly not be seen as a patristic word for skivvy or hanger-on. Equally, however, it is clear that there is now an ecumenical consensus that the term is applied to the servant ministry of the neediest, reflecting the very practice of Christ himself, who began his ministry by preaching Good News to the poor (Luke 4:16-21).

Deacons also had liturgical functions, pointing to the vital interconnecting nature of their ministry. They were responsible for the presentation of the elements prepared for

⁴ *A Deacons as Beacons. The Diaconate: A Personal and Catholic Reflection*. Unpublished paper presented to the Theology and Unity Group of Churches Together in England by a Catholic deacon.

⁵ McPartlan, P. *The Diaconate, An Ecumenical Opportunity*. Paper presented at Lutheran Council of Great Britain, p 8. For published papers covering the same ground by Fr. McPartlan, I refer the reader to his article in Briefing 32.4 (2002) in which he emphasises the importance of the context of the stress in Gaudium et Spes of Vatican II on 'reading the signs of the times' and the Church's learning from the world as well as vice-versa. He also wrote a valuable chapter in Keating, J (ed) *The Deacon Reader* (2006) on 'The Deacon and Gaudium et Spes.' These give a far more thorough background in the theology of Vatican II than I can attempt in this article.

⁶ *Deacons as Beacons*, p.4.

consecration, they read the Gospel and could preach. They also lit and blessed the paschal candle. My deacon friend comments that ‘the deacon is the minister of the real presence of Jesus in the Word, just as the priest is minister of the real presence in the eucharistic species’⁷.

The paper *Deacons as Beacons* refers to the period between 100 and 600 AD as the golden age of the diaconate⁸. After the latter date, the diaconate, at any rate in the West, became a shadow of its former self. Deacons from that point onwards until the sixteenth century did not fulfil a lifelong ministry as such. Theirs was a transitional ministry, ordination to it constituting a sort of probationary period for persons who intended to become presbyters and whom, indeed, the Church needed as presbyters⁹.

The reasons for this development are complex. The Church in the West, as a result of mass conversions following the toleration and then the official adoption of the Christian religion by the state in the fourth century, expanded enormously. No longer could the bishop preside at a single eucharist for the whole diocese. Separate parishes had to be established, especially in new rural and small town outposts, and staffed by presbyters whose role in the public eye grew now that they were the celebrants of the eucharist. Another factor in the decline of the diaconate may have been that much of the caritative work of the time was disrupted by the chaos of the barbarian invasions and the Dark Ages. Caritative work was, of course, continued by the monks with their tradition of hospitality and it was they who dominated such work in the high Middle Ages.

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches continued the transitional ministry of deacon. The Book of Common Prayer recorded Anglican deacons as having a duty of bringing the needs of the poor to the attention of the priest in charge of their parish, but there is little record of this having been a particular feature of their year in the diaconate. The Lutheran churches made no serious attempt to continue a diaconate and ordinations to it lapsed in the Church of Sweden which did preserve the traditional presbyterate and episcopate¹⁰.

Calvin acknowledged a fourfold ministry as prescribed in the New Testament, with deacons having a duty to the poor of their particular churches¹¹. English Baptist and Congregationalist churches from the seventeenth century have had deacons chosen by the congregation who combined administrative duties with care for the poorer members of the

⁷ Ibid, p.5. Protestants, and, I think, Catholics since Vatican II would wish to add that presbyters/pastors are also ministers of the word as well as of sacrament.

⁸ *Deacons as Beacons*, p.3.

⁹ One should add that this transitional ministry is not without significance for priests. Mary Tanner, the Anglican ecumenist, speaks of priests taking their diaconate into their priesthood. They do not cease to be deacons and should preserve a diaconal heart.

¹⁰ See my commentary on the report ‘To Love and Serve the Lord. Diakonia in the Life of the Church’ (2012, Anglican-Lutheran international dialogue) in *One in Christ* (2013), pp. 155-162.

¹¹ Henderson, G.D. *Presbyterianism* (1954), pp. 72-91, discusses the evolution of the diaconate in this tradition.

church community and the liturgical role of distributing the elements at communion. Their administrative role has tended to predominate in more recent times.

When John Wesley consecrated Thomas Coke as superintendent for the American mission in 1784, he also provided the American brethren with a version of the Book of Common Prayer, which provided for the ordination of deacons as well as elders and bishops. The Americans simply continued the transitional ministry as inherited from Anglican custom. Deacons were transitional ministers, 'on trial' to use Methodist phraseology, a situation in which they remained till their reception into full connexion and ordination as elders. British Methodism preserved presbyteral ministry as the *only* form of ordained ministry. There was a strong Methodist tradition from the very beginning of ministry to the poor, both Methodists and non-Methodist, the latter through the famous Strangers' Friends Society, but it was not felt, prior to the creation of the Wesley Deaconess Order in 1890, that this required any specially set aside ministry¹².

The beginning of the recovery of a specifically called and commissioned focal ministry of diakonia began in some Lutheran and Reformed churches on the continent of Europe in the nineteenth century, the first institution for them being set up in Kaiserwerth in 1836. It was in the context of rapid social change, as modern industrialisation helped to cause considerable social dislocation, particularly in rapidly growing towns. The deacons concerned were deaconesses, women being seen as particularly suited to the relief of poverty, distress and ill-health.

Similar developments occurred in both the Church of England and British Methodism.

In the former, Elizabeth Ferard was licensed as the first deaconess by the Bishop of London in 1862. She founded the deaconess community of St Andrew. In 1920, the Lambeth Conference discussed the role of deaconesses, regarding their ministry as the one ministry admissible for women within their particular branch of the one holy, catholic Church and one that was modelled on the pattern of diakonia in the early Church, not to be confused with the ministry of deacons within the historic three-fold apostolic ministry¹³.

As the result of the work of two pioneering ministers, Hugh Price Hughes in his West London Mission and Thomas Bowman Stephenson, founder of the Methodist orphanage later known as the national Children's Home, sisterhoods were created in both institutions and subsequently incorporated, in 1890, by Conference into the Wesley Deaconess Order. As the name suggests, it partook of some of the same flavour as active orders of female religious in the Catholic Church. The sisters, titled as such, were pledged to remain unmarried (they could leave the Order for marriage if they wished). They did not take a vow

¹² For the Wesley Deaconess Order see standard history by E. Dorothy Graham, *Saved to Serve. The Story of the Wesley Deaconess Order 1890-1978*. (2002)

¹³ For an excellent recent reflection on the diaconate by an Anglican woman deacon see Brown, Rosalind, 'Exploring the theological Foundation of the Deacon's Ministry' in *Ecclesiology* (2017, no2), pp. 197-224.

of poverty, though, until the 1960's, they were paid extremely meagrely, some of them living in near poverty themselves.

The continental and British Methodist deaconesses were not regarded as a separate order of *ordained* ministry. For constitutional purposes, they were regarded as lay though, from 1935 the Wesley Deaconesses were ordained to their office after a probationary period¹⁴. The Church of England deaconesses were also regarded as lay workers and not related to the transitional ministry of male deacons. The flavour of the Wesley Deaconess Order and the considerable number of tasks it was required to undertake can be gathered from this extract from their 1935 ordinal.

They were to be 'nurse the sick, care for the poor, to rescue the fallen, to succour the hopeless, to offer friendship, even at cost, to many who but for you, may never know a Christian friend'. They were to be 'true evangelists of our Lord Jesus Christ, translating your gospel into the language of personal service, that it may be better understood'¹⁵.

There was a tendency for the nursing function of the deaconess orders to tail off in the early twentieth century as nursing became more fully established as an independent health profession. All were regarded as ancillary ministries, subordinate to male pastors or presbyters and not, as is now the case in British Methodism, diaconal ministers with a ministry equal in dignity and complementary within the whole life of the Church to that of the presbyterate.

I return now to the restoration of the permanent diaconate within the Roman Catholic Church. For the first time, this opened an ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church to married men, who could also continue to work in the secular world. Both facts helped to establish the ministry of deacon as an important go-between ministry, one in which men who had normally remained in the lay world for some time before offering themselves for diaconal ministry could form useful links with the wider community, increasingly in many places multi-denominational, multi-faith and secular, helping the community to understand what the Church is all about as well as making the clergy and perhaps some lay folk understand the changing mindsets and developments within the rest of the community.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of giving a short course on ecumenism to the trainee deacons of the diocese of Clifton (i.e. the Bristol region). I shared with them both the perspectives of Vatican II on ecumenism and Methodism. I was deeply impressed with the group who ranged in age from thirties to sixties. Some of the younger deacons were very media savvy, far more so than I am, and had all sorts of good ideas for exploiting the world of social media in order to communicate the Gospel.

¹⁴ The problem, for British Methodism was that the Deed of Union (1932) refers to only one order of ordained ministry. It was not till the 1990's that this was changed to speak of two such orders, diaconal and presbyteral.

¹⁵ (British Methodist) *Book of Offices* (1936), p.69.

I gather the development of the permanent diaconate has varied with some dioceses taking little interest but others producing many permanent deacons, Chicago apparently having produced over a thousand since Vatican II¹⁶. It is clear, however, that successive pontiffs have valued the role of the permanent diaconate. John Paul II admitted that a key consideration at Vatican II had been to provide ordained pastoral assistants for priests under pressure; however, he argued that the Holy Spirit had wonderfully used this reason for action as a way of restoring in the Church the 'complete picture' of ordained ministry, which includes deacons as well as presbyters and bishops. He felt that a flourishing diaconate and a flourishing laity went together and had helped the Catholic Church recover from the very long period between the early Middle Ages and the early twentieth century when the laity had become 'increasingly passive in the liturgy and ignored in terms of a formal apostolate'¹⁷,

The development of the permanent diaconate for men raised in the minds of some Roman Catholics the possibility of women also being admitted to the diaconate. They pointed to the fact that whereas it is far from certain that references in patristic era to 'presbyterai' and 'episcopae' refer to the emerging Catholic church rather than Gnostic or other sects, there seems to be no doubt that some women were ordained to the diaconate in totally orthodox churches even though their functions may have been wholly or largely confined to helping other women and preparing female catechumens for baptism. John Paul II stalled any conversation on the matter, but, in 2016, Pope Francis promised that a commission would be set up to consider whether women could and should be ordained to the diaconate. This was naturally welcome news to Protestants and Anglicans who did a considerable amount of rethinking about the diaconate in the 1970's and 80's. The Church of England admitted women to the diaconate in 1987, some of the women deacons being permanent deacons simply because they believe that they cannot be ordained as presbyters. At a Churches Together in England Forum in 2015, I slightly forwardly asked a woman deacon from a largely conservative anglo-catholic diocese whether she was a deacon because she believed she couldn't be a priest or whether it was that she had received a purely diaconal vocation. She readily replied 'both'.

Meanwhile the same Holy Spirit, whose inspiration of the fathers of Vatican II led to their decision about the permanent diaconate, has also been moving in other churches. I noted with interest that the Church of Greece, often regarded as one of the more conservative Orthodox churches has restored the diaconate of women (1998). In the Protestant churches there has been a strong move towards the reform and development of ordained diaconal ministries.

The dialogue between Anglicans and Lutherans has played a key role in those two communions. In the Hanover Report of 1995, the diaconate was a major topic in the

¹⁶ Information kindly provided by Fr. McPartlan in an e-mail 19 March 2018.

¹⁷ P. McPartlan, *The Diaconate. An Ecumenical Opportunity*, op cit, p 7-8.

conversation. The widely differing diaconates of the two communions were surveyed, the Lutheran one being as described above, with its origins in the nineteenth century and caritative in nature but without liturgical functions as such, the Anglican one still being liturgical and transitional. The two communions were effectively challenged to bring together what history had put asunder, the caritative, diakonial side of diaconal ministry and the liturgical side. Since then some churches in both traditions have moved accordingly. The Church of Sweden has restored the traditional, ordained diaconate. Three Church of England dioceses have pioneered a permanent diaconate, community related but with liturgical functions, apparently non-stipendiary also.

Fr McPartlan, commenting on both the diaconate within the Catholic Church and the findings of the Hanover Report, says that it is as if the functions of early diaconal ministry had been divided up between Anglicans and Catholics on the one hand, preserving a liturgical role for deacons and Lutherans and Reformed on the other conserving the social outreach and caritative roles¹⁸.

The good news of the last thirty five years or so is that both roles are becoming re-integrated in several quarters of the oikoumene. The Anglicans and Lutherans followed up the Hanover Report with a study of diakonia, the first time diakonia as a whole Church responsibility of all the faithful had been so studied. It presents this holistic definition.

‘Diakonia takes the forms of prophetic witness, advocacy and empowering action, as well as compassionate care. Diakonia means not only giving aid, but also confronting the concentration of power and wealth that is the cause of poverty. A diaconal church accompanies, bolsters and empowers the economically weak and vulnerable; with them it resists abusive manoeuvres that deprive them of their human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights’¹⁹.

These are strong statements, but certainly in accord with the beginning of the ministry of the supreme diakononos when He first proclaimed good news to the poor and deliverance of the captives (Luke 4: 18-19). Some may feel wary of trespassing too far into the realm of politics as a result, though there is a distinction to be made between the proclamation of Christian values for human society, surely a true part of proclaiming the good news, and detailed discussion of particular alternative policies for dealing with admitted problems on which there can be surely legitimate variation of opinion amongst individual Christians involved in politics. It is worth remembering that in the search for the sort of diaconal advocacy mentioned above allies may legitimately be found amongst adherents of other religions and indeed those of good will who have no religion as such. Clement Attlee, the famous post-war British Prime Minister, who created the modern welfare state was, in terms of belief, an agnostic. He could not, as he put it disparagingly, understand the

¹⁸ McPartlan, op cit, p. 18.

¹⁹ *To Love and Serve the Lord*, p.9.

‘mumbo-jumbo’, but he did admire the Christian ethic as applied to everyday life and social justice. There are also those who have been won for the gospel since early days when they saw ‘how these Christians love one another’ and perhaps that can be even truer when they see compassion and care given regardless of race or creed²⁰.

Deacons, the report stress, focus the ministry in which all members of the Church should be engaged according to their situation in life. They encourage and enable, by example, the diaconal ministry of the whole people of God, who, one might add, are a servant diaconal people as well as a kingdom of priests. The deacon is the vital go-between, his or her ministry linking the worship of the church community (where the deacon has a particular role in bringing the needs of the local community to the attention of the congregation in that place) to the concerns of the wider local community. The deacon has a particular responsibility for marking the essential link between leitourgia or worship and diakonia (service), for facilitating what St John Chrysostom called the ‘service after the service’.

Two contemporary British Methodist deacons illustrate the flavour of their ministry. Deacon Sylvia, was a deacon on a working class council estate in South Bristol She was glad that she could combine her shopping in the local supermarket with her ministry! There she met and heard about the problems and concerns of a wide range of other women engaged in the same activity; often she was able to express concern and offer advice and help.

Deacon Allyson is a deacon in Manchester. Like both Catholic and Methodist deacons, he spends a lot of time on preparation for marriages, baptisms and funerals. In each he aims to invite people to worship, but also visits them in their homes to get to know them in their domestic settings. He runs a drop in cafe where people can find warmth and company. In the wake of jihadist bombing in Manchester, he organised, with local Anglicans, a visit to two mosques with cards, saying to the muslims ‘you are loved’²¹.

He sums up his work as follows

‘My passion in ministry is mission and outreach, spending time in the community where people are. Other passions are ecumenical work and racial justice.’

The two deacons are members of the present Methodist Diaconal Order. The former Wesley Deaconess Order was closed in 1978 but the Connexion soon realised that it could not do without a diaconal ministry and the Diaconal Order was reconstituted in 1988, open to both sexes, also to married candidates. In the Conference statement of 2004, *What is a Deacon* British Methodism sets out its understanding

²⁰ A recent report in *The Tablet* mentioned that some muslim refugees from Syria in Austria had been so overwhelmed with the love and care shown by a Catholic parish that they had asked to become Christians. For Attlee see the standard biography by Paul Bew, *Citizen Clem*, (2016)

²¹ Report in *Methodist Recorder*, 16 Feb 2018.

'British Methodist deacons focus and express the servant-hood of Christ not just through being an order of ministry...but also through being a religious order (a group of people who take a life-long commitment to each other to support each other in a shared discipline of the spiritual life). As a body of deacons who belong to an order of ministry, The Methodist Diaconal Order exercises a leading, public and representative role of service in and on behalf of the Church. Through being a religious order the MDO seeks to model for the Church a way of discipleship in which individuals journey in company with one another. Personal and social holiness are combined and prayerful reflection issues in prayer filled action. A life of fellowship and prayer nurtures each member and prepares them for mission. In this way the MDO pursues John Wesley's vision for the Methodist'²².

This makes it clear that British Methodism wishes its deacons to be seen as deacons within the one holy Catholic Church, deacons formed in conformity with the typos of Christian life, thought, worship and fellowship that characterises the Methodist tradition, but in no way excluding recognition of the diaconates of other churches.

The Ordination service (1999) stresses this servant ministry as follows. Deacons are to

Assist God's people in worship and prayer;

To hold before them the needs and concerns of the world;

To minister Christ's love and compassion:

To visit and support the sick and suffering;

To seek out the lost and lonely;

And to help those you serve offer their lives to God²³.

British Methodism insistent that the diaconate is in no way inferior to the presbyterate in status; unlike the former deaconesses, deacons are now paid on a par with presbyters.

British Methodism is not alone in world Methodism in reforming its diaconate. In the 1990's, the United Methodist Church (USA) ended its transitional diaconate and developed a permanent diaconate whose members are ordained to 'word, service, sacrament and order.'²⁴ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa has a diaconate pledged to 'remind the Church of God's love for the poor and oppressed and to strive to share Christ's love by service'.²⁵ They have been very heavily involved in the reconciling work needed in their country after the fall of apartheid. They stress that 'deacons are primarily *encouragers* and

²² *What is a Deacon* (2004), para 3.4.

²³ *Methodist Worship Book*, (1999), p. 317.

²⁴ Information kindly supplied by Victoria Rebeck, Director of Deacon Ministry development in the United Methodist Church

²⁵ On the Diaconate section of the excellent website of the MCSA.

enablers and that they seek to grow church members in understanding aspects of ministry within the local context .

Other traditions are also re-empowering their diaconates. The Church of Scotland, a reformed church, now has 58 deacons serving in areas of social deprivation, though less connected with local church communities than is the case with the Methodist deacons. The church defines its deacons as ‘contextualising the gospel in day to day living’ and also as ‘encouraging the church to discover new patterns of service’. Like British Methodism it insists that the diaconate is not a ‘an inferior, second class ministry’. There are diaconates both in the ELCA and the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church in USA.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster balances carefully the mission to the poor and the championing of social justice with the roles of leadership in the parish, catechesis and assistance to the parish priest.

Deacon David Clark, speaking of the Church as a whole says,

‘The Church in the UK urgently needs a renewed diaconate as the catalyst to inspire lay people, the Church’s primary resource for mission, to become kingdom community builders within every sector of society’²⁶.

We may conclude with the remarks of Pope Francis in a jubilee address to deacons. He reminds deacons that ‘one who serves is not a slave to his agenda but is ever ready to deal with the unexpected...ever open to God’s constant surprises’. He concludes ‘Dear Deacons, if you show yourselves to be available to others, your ministry will not be self –serving but ever fruitful’²⁷.

As so often, Pope Francis goes to the very heart of the matter. He sums up what is the growing consensus across the oikoumene about the essential link between ordained diaconal ministry and the diakonial ministry of the whole people of God in a challenging, globalised world. Availability is a key word in defining diaconal ministry and diakonia is availability after the model of our Lord’s availability to rejected sinners, to the poor and sick, even to strangers, like the Canaanite woman and Roman Centurion, whose servant he healed.

There is a very real a sense in which we are already at one over the nature of a ministry essential to the Church as it seeks, like its Lord, to build bridges, to be a true communion modelling that community to which God calls all humanity that all people may know the compassionate and tender mercy of our God in Christ Jesus.

²⁶ *Methodist Recorder*, 20 Oct 2017. Note the similarity to Pope Francis appeal for Christians of spirit as teachers, doctors, business people etc. *Evangelii Gaudium*, para . Deacon David contrasts the relatively small numbers in the diaconate in British Methodism and the Church of England with the statistics for North America. 150 Methodist deacons and 100 Anglican as against 1,700 in the United Methodist Church and 3,000 in the Episcopal Church.

²⁷ Cited on US Bishops’ Conference website.

David Carter.