

Deacons in New Hampshire: An introduction

After a generation of relative absence, we seek to re-establish the presence of deacons in the Church in New Hampshire. The word deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonoi*, which means servant. In our baptismal vows we all promise to participate in a life of service: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” (*Book of Common Prayer, page 305.*) Thus, whether as lay-person, priest, deacon, or bishop, each of us is called to address the needs of others as a means to deepen our relationship to Christ in the world. The re-introduction of the diaconate (the ministry of deacons) in New Hampshire is not a substitute the service of the laity or other orders of the ministry. A deacon is not a surrogate for the servant ministry of the other orders. Rather, the deacons aim is to support, invite, and represent our intentional desire to serve God’s mission and people in the world.

We see four possible dimensions to the shape of the diaconate in New Hampshire:

Self-Corrective to the otherwise pre-occupied Church:

The establishment of the diaconate in the earliest church is recorded in Acts 6 when those who found themselves outside of the circle of privilege, the Hellenists, complained that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. The church acknowledges an injustice within its common life. These Hellenists appear to have first interpreted the needs of the fellowship to those who otherwise were unaware or unconcerned about this neglect. To address this disparity, “the twelve,” the established leadership of apostles, respond to this crisis in the Church by creating the diaconate as a self-corrective to the church’s preoccupation in its teaching ministry of the “Word of God.” What is ironic in this narrative is that among the first of these deacons is Stephen. It is Stephen, and not one of “the “Twelve” who courageously preaches the Word to great effect to those *outside the fellowship*. Though commissioned initially to free others to preach the Word, Stephen consequently becomes the first martyr to give his life in witness to the Gospel as a direct result of his preaching.

Representing the servant ministry in an outward and visible way

By interpreting to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world, the deacon *invites and encourages* the fuller participation of all the ministries, lay and ordained, to be sent to those places of discomfort, challenge, and need. Traditionally, though not exclusively, deacons earn their livelihood in occupations dedicated to the service of others: e.g., mental health, food distribution, human resources, education, advocacy or those who have no voice in our church or society. In action, symbol, and word, the deacon can publically state that the church is listening to the needs of the world, particularly in those places of need where not all are called to go: service agencies, prisons, schools, and other “Matthew 25” settings.

Lifting up the servant ministry of all the baptized

The deacon in no way substitutes, but is meant to complement and represent the servant ministry of all the baptized to the world outside the gathered worshipping assembly. Subsequently, the deacon brings those concerns and needs back to the awareness of the gathered worshipping community for their discernment and response in prayer and action.

Assisting the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments.

More and more of our parishes cannot afford full-time priestly presence. More will need to share priests for the administration of sacraments and ordained leadership. Congregations will continue to need to feel connected to the diocese and to each other for mutual support, sacramental nourishment, and to be reminded of their apostolic ministry (Let us go forth and serve the Lord.) A deacon, working directly under the direction of the bishop, can provide some of the spiritual and ecclesiastic ligament that holds us together. A deacon may share in the liturgical leadership of two or more congregations that share a priest by offering Morning or Evening Prayer in the absence of the priest who may be presiding at the Eucharist in the other parish. There is a need for conversation about the appropriateness of "the deacon's mass" in those settings. The bishop is open to discernment about this in limited and careful circumstances.

Characteristics Needed in the Diaconate

- +A love for the servant ministry of Jesus and a life-long desire to learn from him.
- +A heart that takes joy in service, not requiring to be in the "spot-light."
- +A capacity to assist the leadership of a congregation to attract and build community.
- +A willingness to serve the bishop and to be assigned (with consideration of the individual's life circumstances) at the bishop's discretion.

Bishop A. Robert Hirschfeld
May 14, 2015