

Why Deacons?

An Interview with Rod Dugliss

By Sean McConnell, Editor, Pacific Church News

For eight years Rod Dugliss PhD, has been the dean of the School for Deacons in Berkeley. The School for Deacons is an institution of the Diocese of California, which also provides diaconal formation for the Diocese of Northern California and for most of the Diocese of El Camino Real. There are twelve school weekends a year (held every three weeks), and a mandatory school retreat – the thirteenth weekend. The School for Deacons is the only diaconal educational program in the country that confers a degree: a Bachelor of Diaconal Studies (BDS).

I must be honest that I've always been a little dumb when it comes to diaconal ministry. For one thing, spelling words like diaconal and diaconate drives me crazy. But my real problem has been trying to understand why the ministry of a deacon seems so much like the ministry of a priest, and so much like the ministry of a lay person, and not very much like either. Perhaps I was a bit too antagonistic in my questions for Dugliss – a man I really like...he's kind and intelligent and one of the most gracious men you'll ever meet...but my antagonism came from a place of really needing to understand. I mean I went through catechism in the '70s when we had to memorize all of the answers by rote, and I graduated from seminary, so I should know more about the ministry of deacons than I do.

Then there's the fact that I know some pretty amazing deacons. The Rev. Nina Pickerrell, for instance, who leads the ministry at Bayview Mission (www.ministriesofgrace.com/bayview), and the Rev Kate Salinaro who is called to communicate the needs of Latino Christians in our communities back to the Church. These two women constantly bring the needs of the world into view of the Church, and they are committed to sharing the Good News of God's love with everyone they encounter.

But I was still dumb. I wasn't sure how that was any different than what a priest is called to do, or how a layperson is called to live. So, feel free to read my questions to Dugliss (in bold) in a smart-alecky tone. And, likewise, you might read his responses as if they were delivered with the patience of Job and the pastoral attention of Mother Teresa.

So, just why do we need deacons anyway?

I think the simplest answer to that is the Good News that we teach, talk about, and proclaim inside our churches on Sunday mornings is supposed to have legs, and have some impact on the world. The deacons are the folk who provide the inspiration and the leadership for that. And without that the Church is at risk of simply imploding on itself and being a lovely liturgical artifact – a liturgy museum.

Why doesn't a priest provide that leadership and inspiration?

Because the priest's plate is more than simply gathering folk around the table and taking care of their individual and collective needs –building that community. The priest's primary job is to take care of the folks, to preach and teach, to celebrate the sacraments with them, and to help them on their journeys. And that is more than a full-time job.

Then why not lay leadership?

Well, I think that the task is the task of all laypersons, and what the deacon provides is resources and skills, what I call real servant leadership to provide some direction, support, encouragement. Lay folk still exist in a largely clerical culture where there is often the sense that you have to ask the priest's permission to do something. A different kind of leadership, a different kind of resource base is needed. It's not that lay folk are incapable of it – these are the people who indeed will do this. Deacons are not going to do it all by themselves. But to have people in positions of leadership in the church, specifically taking the Gospel out to the streets, making that part of the baptismal covenant come alive, and giving people the support, they need – I think it's essential.

Then why don't we pay our deacons?

There are two reasons we don't pay our deacons: One is a good one and one is a lousy one. The good one is that deacons have a distinctive call to be the prophetic voice in a congregation and that sometimes ruffles feathers – and not being on the payroll gives people a certain amount of freedom. They don't put their jobs in jeopardy – if you will – by being prophetic.

The lousy rational for not paying deacons is that having established that for whatever reason, it's cheap labor. And the church, generally, is happy to extract as much work from someone for as little compensation as possible and the diaconate fits that particularly unfortunate model.

Recently, the Rev. James Tramel (recently called as rector of Trinity, San Francisco) said to me that the first clergy person that he would like to hire would be a deacon, and have them paid for their work. I had assumed that there were canonical reasons (canons are the by-laws of the church) that we don't pay deacons. Tramel said "No," and that the reason in his mind that we don't pay deacons is that many churches feel if they are going to pay a salary to a clergy person that they should pay a priest – to get more bang for their buck.

Groan!

Well, say more about that "groan."

Well, there's a question I would put to James on that, which is in a little piece I've written called *How do I get a Deacon?* And that is: 'What does he see this deacon actually doing?' Because one of the things that has become not a red flag, but a pink flag for me is when I hear a priest saying, "I really need a deacon – I need some help around here." And what they're looking for is a collared person to help with the pastoral load – the work around the congregation – and it's only marginally diaconal.

Well, I believe that what he was saying was "If we are going to hire somebody in a Church that needs to grow in the city of San Francisco, the area to grow is in social ministry, and the people to bring in to do social ministry work are deacons – not priests.

Absolutely! I agree with that 100%. And a reason for hiring somebody to do that is that you would have somebody who had the time because they wouldn't be holding down their day

job during the week and then being able to give only a limited amount of that leadership to the congregation.

A value of that arrangement for lay folk is that they see deacons struggling with the same things they struggle with on a day-to-day basis: putting bread on the table, working in a secular world. So that when a deacon speaks about ministry in and to that world, he or she brings a kind of credibility that the priest who has spent a long time in the four walls of the church lacks.

Another point – and I’m really convinced of this – there’s a lovely, kind of arcane document called “The Hannover Report” that was created in the ‘90s among the Lutheran churches of the Baltic region that have kept the three historic orders (including the diaconate), the Church of England and the American Episcopal Church, seeking to find parity and mutual recognition of ministry, and it has some good theological grounding for the orders and particularly the order of the deacon. The report talks about three things that the church is about – using fancy Greek terms. It says that when the people gather, they do what we call “the work of the people” Litурgeo, or they do liturgy. And going out of liturgy are two other things – marteria and diakonia. Marteria is the Greek word for witness, and diakonia has a variety of interpretations but means service-ministry in the world. It’s all of a piece. And so, the reason that you are gathering is to nurture and support people’s capacity to witness and people’s capacity to become agents of the Good News in the world.

What I hear from priests often, and I think is still the ethos of the seminary world, is: In a challenging time where mainline churches are in decline you get to be the person who comes in to turn this around. What I hear is that hat we really have to do is groove up our liturgy – It’s got to be more contemporary. Let’s play with the liturgy...

Let’s do a light show.

Yeah, or if we do it this new way, we will have people stumbling through the doors to join us, and I think that’s wrong. What I see more and more evidence of, like some of the stuff I hear from Bishop Marc’s stories out of his work in Alabama that he’s bringing to this diocese, is that young people, first of all, are engaged by human suffering and want to know what the hell we’re doing about that. And so, it seems to me if you are out there engaging human suffering people will join you. Then you have the opportunity to say why you are doing this – marteria, to do the witness. The last thing you do is to say, “Would you like to come and then celebrate all this that we’re doing and get support of it.” And so, we have a leadership, on the one hand, who are saying, “Let’s lead with groovy liturgy,” and who hope we’ll grow the church. Whereas, particularly in the Bay Area – in this part of the world – the only thing that’s going to get people’s attention is what we might call diakonia at work in the world, which will give you a chance to say why, to do the witness. You don’t have to stand on a street corner on Market and yell and draw people in. Deacons, I think, are key to that. Deacons who get that can be – in a sense – the evangelical cutting edge of the church, which is something that most people don’t even think about when they think about the diaconate.

In the Diocese of California, deacons are a rich part of the ministry of many of our churches. How long has that been the case?

The Diocese of California has participated in the renewal of the diaconate that began in the middle of the last century. And it is one of several times in which the diaconate has woken up, got up, and started walking. In the 19th century it did so for some really good and some really bad reasons. And so, there's a thread in this diocese that goes way back. That thread has with it, also, some of the concerns and issues around the renewal itself, and the diaconate.

When James Pike was bishop here, one of the things that he was advocating in the national church was the canonical provision of what we would now recognize as lay Eucharistic ministers. And in those days lay people couldn't touch the chalice. So, if you were the priest in a sizeable congregation, you had to do all of this communion stuff yourself, and in the 50s churches were growing. So, here was an answer. And it got turned down at a General Convention yet again. So, the story goes that James Pike called eleven laymen that he knew and said, "Show up at Grace Cathedral on Christmas Eve. I'm going to ordain you deacons." And he did. And the next week he called a priest in the diocese and said, "These people need some training and formation. Do something." And so, this guy put together what ended up being The School for Ministry which pre-dated The School for Deacons some twenty-odd years. And it was a school that prepared priests reading for orders, deacons as they were understood in those days, and to do some lay education.

But those deacons, and there are still a couple of these guys around, saw themselves – and the church saw them – primarily as liturgical artifacts. They dressed up on Sunday, they participated in the liturgy and they assisted in communion, and that was the extent of it. And then somebody else came along and said there's a whole lot more to this. Then when the ordination rites from the trial use leading to the now 1979 Book of Common Prayer were there, the casting of the diaconate was quite different, and there's where we get this familiar language: "You are to minister to all people, especially the poor, the sick, the weak, and the lonely. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. You are to make Christ's love present where you work and live and worship." So, this put a whole edge of social ministry presence, and some of those first generations of deacons felt a little out of joint. I mean that's not what they signed up for, that's not what they were asked to do. And there was some tension there.

As people in this diocese grew into the expressions of that ministry, they became the dominant presence, very much focused on chaplaincy roles, particularly in hospitals and prisons, later in homeless shelters, and so forth. In the last decade the new cutting edge has been to see social ministry as also rooted in social justice. The story I use to illustrate that is not a diaconal one, but it comes out of the liberation theology movement. Dom Helder Camara, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Recife, said "When I fed the hungry, they called me a saint. When I asked, 'Why are they hungry?', they called me a communist."

The pushing then beyond the presenting issues of society – the hungry, the homeless, the addicted, things going wrong – to beginning to look at the systems and structures behind this and call the church's attention to it and ask "How do we respond to that?" That's where the diaconate is growing today. In the Diocese of California you find that thread all the way back to someone who was called primarily to be liturgical assistant to the priest, up to people now asking and pushing on some pretty sharp edges of social justice: they're all deacons, it's all diaconal ministry, but that thread exists in this diocese.