

## DEACONS' TOOL KIT



### A POTTED HISTORY OF THE DIACONATE

#### New Testament

**Acts 6:** Seven men selected by prayer and the Holy Spirit and by the whole church to 'deacon' tables so as to free the apostles to 'deacon' the word. Most celebrated was Stephen, who became the first martyr.

**53-ish AD:** Paul's epistle, addressed to "all the holy ones at Philippi, with their bishops and deacons in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 1:1)

**AD 60-70,** Deacon Phoebe (Romans 16:1) mentioned in Paul's greetings – so women were part of the diaconate from very early on.

**1 Timothy, (circa 70-80),** the most qualified of the dedicated, enrolled widows selected as deacons in parallel to the male deacons.

**100 A.D. Ignatius of Antioch:** the deacon's task was to continue "the ministry of Jesus Christ ... the deacons represent Jesus Christ, the Bishop represented God and the presbyters the council of the apostles".



*Bishop, priest and deacon*

**The *Didascalía* (third century):** Ignatius likened male deacons to Jesus Christ as the female deacons were likened to the Holy Spirit.

***St John Chrysostom* ( c 349 – 407)** began his ministry at Antioch where his aunt was a deacon.

The ***Apostolic Constitutions* (fourth century)** give the greatest amount of information about the order or office of women in the diaconate. The deaconess is included under the term "cleros" (clergy) but later there was a tendency to limit her ministry. Canon XV of the council of Chalcedon (451) lowered the age of ordination to 40, which had an historic knock-on effect and eventually helped to give rise to the diaconate becoming simply a probationary period before priesthood.

By the ***late fourth century*** women Deacons alongside male Deacons were largely taken for granted as far west as Greece, also in Constantinople, Asia Minor, Jerusalem, Gaza, Greek- speaking Syria and Syriac-speaking Syria.

***Early fifth century***, Syria: male deacons worked with the 'Sons of the Covenant' (dedicated brothers) and female deacons worked with the 'Daughters of the Covenant' (dedicated sisters) in caring for needy men and women in separate institutions.

***By mid- fifth century*** the three orders were organised in a new way. Their role in the Eucharist began to govern their place within the church. Deacons became assistants of priests, as well as bishops, and primarily at the altar. Ever more emphasis was placed on the liturgical role of deacons, at the expense of the ministry of the word and of charity. By this time the diaconate was seen merely as a step on the way toward ordination as a priest.

***Quick glance at the Eastern Orthodox:*** the male diaconate did not decline, the practice of a distinctive diaconate continuing to today's church but with a predominantly liturgical function. The Greek Orthodox Church has recently agreed to reconsider women in the diaconate, and the Coptic Orthodox church ordained its first women deacons in 2016.

### **Medieval times**

Medieval deacons were male and in major, not minor orders, were celibate and had a mainly liturgical function, assisting the priest at the Eucharist, preaching and baptizing. They also acquired administrative responsibilities on behalf of the bishop. The diaconate was a transitional period on the road to priesthood. Permanent deacons did exist, often in academic posts (schoolmasters, canon lawyers etc).

At the ***Reformation*** the English Church continued, uninterrupted, the historic threefold ordained ministry (important for 'apostolic succession') and the diaconate remained transitional to priesthood.

**19<sup>th</sup> century:** emergence of a new sense of professionalism among the clergy and growing awareness of huge pastoral needs in large urban parishes, so the (male) diaconate was taken more seriously. Developed as a probationary year during which the priest learned his priestly duties under supervision. In one sense, this strengthened the diaconate giving it professional identity. On the other hand, the move affirmed the 'transitional' model. Development of deaconess orders pointed to the possibilities of a distinctive professional diaconal ministry.

### **Deacons' movement in Germany**

Diaconal ministry found new expression in Germany in the 19th Century. Male deacons were the first to be restored in Hamburg by Wichern, who formed the 'Inner' or 'Home' Mission and trained deacons for it. This eventually developed into over a dozen Schools for training deacons and many institutions. The idea of a sisterhood of unmarried women spread throughout the protestant world in a surprisingly short time. This diaconal activity gave a new image to nursing, social work and education within and outside the church parish.

### **The diaconate in the UK**

**Deaconesses** became an integral part of the churches' response to poor health and social conditions in 19th century Britain too. The Methodist Church, Presbyterian Churches of Scotland and Ireland, and the Church of England all commissioned deaconesses to the work of social relief, education and nursing care. Deaconesses were not at that time permitted to marry. Male deacons were transitional.

In 1993 the Methodist Church restored its original Wesley Deaconess tradition to form the Methodist Diaconal Order <http://methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk/> In 2002 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland decided to ordain its deaconesses and deacons.

*A quick glance at the Roman Catholics:* 1967 Pope Paul VI restored the ancient practice of ordaining to the diaconate men who were not candidates for priestly ordination, with their focus on Word, Liturgy and Charity. These men may be married. There are no women deacons, but last year Pope Francis set up a commission to study the issue of women deacons.

### **Deaconesses in the Church of England**

**Elizabeth Ferard** was the first deaconess in England, receiving her licence from Bishop Tait of London on 18th July 1862. Founded a community of deaconesses which was also a religious sisterhood, the (Deaconess) Community of St Andrew. Prior to the ordination of women as deacons (1987) many deaconesses ministered within parish communities throughout England.

### **DIAKONIA World Federation**

The DIAKONIA World Federation now has 70 member groups representing 20,000 diaconal workers within a wide range of traditions. The Federation is organised into three geographical regions and meets on a global basis every four years.

### **Recent history in the Church of England**

The **Lambeth Conference of 1968** recommended:

(a) That the diaconate, combining service of others with liturgical functions be open to:

- **men and women remaining in secular occupations**
- full-time church workers
- those selected for the priesthood.

(b) That Ordinals should, where necessary, be revised:

- to take account of the new role envisaged for the diaconate; (ii) by the removal of reference to the diaconate as an inferior office;
- by emphasis upon the continuing element of *diakonia* in the ministry of bishops and priests.

(c) That those made deaconess by laying on of hands with appropriate prayers be declared to be within the diaconate.

**1974** the Advisory Committee for the Church's Ministry (ACCM) produced a report that was unable to find a convincing theological rationale for the diaconate and recommended abolishing it altogether. The 1977 debate in General Synod declined to follow this advice (!)

**1986** the Church of England commissioned further work which resulted in the report '*Deacons and the Church*' (1988). In 1987 about 700 deaconesses were ordained as deacons - with no immediate prospect of becoming priests. There was suddenly an urgent need to understand the order theologically and at the ministerial level to develop diaconal ministry in a new professional way. The report recommended setting up of **a distinctive diaconate for both men and women**. The opening of priestly orders to women and the first ordinations in 1994 somewhat eclipsed the report.

### **Renewal of the Diaconate in the Church of England**

In the **1990s** much change affected the Church; not only women in priestly orders but also developments in ecumenical theology, changes in society's norms, an enhanced awareness of missiology, developments in lay ministry and new theological insights from New Testament research. During these changing times emerged a small group of men and women committed to the ministry of deacon. The ***Diaconal Association of the Church of England***, once well-subscribed by women deacons, became a smaller association for those whose calling was distinctively diaconal.

Meanwhile the ground-breaking and scholarly work of **John N Collins** shed new light on the New Testament use of language and in particular the Greek 'diaconal' terms. The Deacon (*Diakonos*) may be thought of as:

- A bearer of a message, a spokesperson, an envoy, a go-between who is entrusted with important tidings
- An agent, an ambassador, a mediator, a person given a commission on behalf of someone in authority – fulfilling a vital task
- An attendant to a person or household, on whose behalf one performs various tasks.

Collins' work has significantly influenced thinking on the diaconate amongst those with an interest in its renewal, and continues to do so (see Useful Books and Papers page on the Deacon blog <https://deaconstories.wordpress.com/some-useful-books-and-papers/>).

**1996** the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission (related to the Porvoo process <http://www.porvoocommunion.org/>) produced the Hanover Report: '*The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*' (<https://deaconstories.wordpress.com/some-useful-books-and-papers/>).

DACE contributed to ecumenical discussions on the diaconate through a series of **Windsor Consultations** on the diaconate, including 'Raising the Dust' in 1996 leading to the '*Windsor Statement*' of 1997: "The Diaconate is a growing movement whose voice is audible around the world ... We are discovering a converging vision for this ministry – an agent for change, transcending boundaries and barriers." The Methodist Diaconal Order (MDO) were partners in these consultations with Roman Catholic and Orthodox representatives.

**1998** General Synod asked the House of Bishops to set up a Working Party on the renewed diaconate. Two members of DACE were included. Their report, '**For such a time as this**' (<https://deaconstories.wordpress.com/some-useful-books-and-papers/>) was brought to Synod in 2001. This potentially land-mark report rapidly became the victim of other agendas and was sent back to Ministry Division.



DACE continued to work towards the restoration of the diaconate as a full and equal order of ministry until its closure in March 2017.

### **The current situation (2017)**

The Ministry Division of the Church of England is committed to the discernment and training of those called to the distinctive diaconate. However, it is sometimes difficult to find dioceses in England where the ministry of the diaconate is understood and encouraged, and where vocations advisers and DDOs actively look for and encourage diaconal vocation. Up until the present time Ministry Division has produced no specifically diaconal dispositions (ie selection criteria and learning outcomes), although the Diocese of Exeter was asked to produce some, which they duly did and offered them to Ministry Division in 2016. Ministry Division is promising to take the vocation and ministry of the diaconate into serious consideration during the current (as at March 2017) wide-ranging revision of their approaches to vocation.

Meanwhile, there is lively interest in a few dioceses, eg York: <http://dioceseofyork.org.uk/news-events/news/deacons-at-work/>

and Exeter: <http://exeter.anglican.org/ministry/vocations/diocesan-deacons/> where there is also a leaflet explaining the vocation of a deacon.

Despite all these challenges and discouragements, God the Holy Spirit continues to call people into the diaconate, as he has done from the birth of the church.

## USEFUL BOOKS AND PAPERS

Avis, Paul: The Diaconate: a Flagship Ministry? *Theology and Ministry* 2 (2013): 2.1-14 ISSN 2049-4513 [theologyandministry2\\_2](#)

Brown, Rosalind: *Being a Deacon Today* (Canterbury Press 2005)

Clark, David: *Building Kingdom Communities with the diaconate as a new order of mission* (Fastprint Publishing, 2016)

Collins, John N: *Deacons and the Church: Making connections between old and new* (Gracewing 2003)

Collins, John N: *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (OUP 2009)

Diocese of Salisbury, *The Distinctive Diaconate* (Sarum College Press, 2003)

Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church: Biblical, theological and contemporary perspectives*. GS Misc 854, (London: Church House Publishing, 2007) [www.churchofengland.org/media/1229854/gsmisc%20854.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1229854/gsmisc%20854.pdf)

*For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*, GS 1407 (London: Church House Publishing, 2001). 0-7151-5764-7 [https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2001/10/news\\_item2004-10-199719611208.aspx](https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2001/10/news_item2004-10-199719611208.aspx)

Hall Christine (ed.) *The Deacon's Ministry*, (Leominster: Gracewing, 1991)

*The Deacon Reader*: ed. by James Keating. Published by Gracewing, 2006. ISBN 0 85244 675 6

*With thanks to Rev Dr Sr Teresa J White, CSA*

*(Potted history compiled by Rev Deacon Gill Kimber, Warden of the College of Deacons, Diocese of Exeter, March 2017)*