

DEACONS' TOOL KIT



DISTINCTIVE DEACONS: MINISTRY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Rev Deacon Terry Drummond

Introduction

The ministry of the Distinctive Deacon is one that requires greater understanding in the Church of England, where the traditional focus is on the transitional year before ordination to the priesthood. A fundamental change is needed to see the importance of a ministry rooted in a history of service and prophetic mission.

In understanding the ministry of the Distinctive Deacon, the emphasis is on both service and mission. It is a ministry rooted in scripture and focused on the sort of service that leads to action. It is rooted too in a worshipping community that sends the Distinctive Deacon out into the wider secular community. The Deacon goes into the equivalent of the public square, wherever people gather and debate issues of public policy.

In Acts 6 the apostles appoint seven men to be of service to the growing community of new Christians. It was their responsibility to ensure that everyone was treated equally. There is also a natural link to the reading by Jesus of Isaiah in Luke 4, and the parable of the Kingdom in Matthew 25. The focus on the prophetic call to work for justice is combined with practical action for the oppressed and dispossessed.

These are key elements of Christian ministry, the work of all disciples, which are focused in the vocation of Distinctive Deacons.

This vocation finds inspiration in the work of the prophets. Amos, a shepherd from Tekoa (Amos 1:1) addressed the structural injustices of his time: the exploitation of the poor and the fact that the wealthy treated the weak with contempt. Amos combined his condemnation of such behaviour with a stark message for the religious leaders of his day. He was a prophet prepared to challenge those who upheld the religious status quo, who had become complacent and lost sight of the good of the people:

*Hear this you that trample on
the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying. When will the new moon be
over
so that we may sell the grain
and the Sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
Amos 8:7*

The message of prophets like Amos was addressed to both religious and civic leaders. The Distinctive Deacon likewise is called to address power in all its forms.

Deacons: Partners in service

In reflecting on both Matthew 25 and Acts 6, the whole people of God are called to serve the poorest and the socially-excluded. It is the distinctive calling of the Deacon to focus this ministry both within and outside the church community.

Such ministry is found in churches opening their doors to the homeless through the winter, offering shelter, a safe space, food, friendship and a bed for the night. In addition to the gift of shelter, it is important to include support for those who come so that they can begin to move on to a new way of life.

Other churches offer food, friendship, clothes and other practical necessities to refugees, alongside classes in the English language and occasional legal advice.

In this context, the contribution of food banks and other services that offer immediate and practical care cannot be underestimated. This is a diaconal ministry, shared with volunteers who express their active concern for the poor and disadvantaged. It is a practical outworking of the words of Jesus 'when I was hungry you fed me' (Matthew 25:31-46). Priest, Deacon and lay people are to be partners in service to the wider community.

However, it is the distinctive contribution of the Deacon to be informed on the social issues involved, and to speak out prophetic words of truth that challenge injustice.

Speaking truth to power

The Distinctive Deacon is therefore called to work and act in the public square, that is, in the wider community outside of the congregation. They are to contribute to discussions on issues at the heart of political discourse that will create and underpin policies for the flourishing of healthy communities.

The Distinctive Deacon may be involved in setting up projects which meet the needs of others. But the Deacon is also mandated by the gospel to challenge the injustice that allows such a situation to arise in the first place, to ask those in authority why food banks are needed, or why there is inadequate provision for the homeless. The message of good news to the poor is given both practical and political outworking.

In developing this model of ministry in the wider political realm, we are speaking truth to power. In doing so, the Deacon follows in the way of the Old Testament Prophets, women and men who spoke out against injustice and challenged the powerful and wealthy.

Isaiah was a servant in the court of the King while Amos was a shepherd. They were representatives of two very different social classes, but both were called to be prophets who would speak the words of God. In Isaiah, we read:

*Learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed
defend the orphan
plead for the widow.*
Isaiah 1:17

The Distinctive Deacon is one who must be prepared to speak truth to power as the prophets did, and to challenge the problems created by policies that lead individuals and families into hunger, or to be caught in a web of regulations that deny them their rights.

Welcome the alien and the stranger

Diaconal ministry also speaks out on behalf of those caught up in immigration regulations, whose status in the UK is challenged by a complex density of Border Agency and Home Office regulations. A Deacon will advocate for those who have a right to remain, and support and work with agencies who do so.

The government has numerous civil servants who are responsible for the creation of regulations that have a negative impact on the weakest in society, those who do not have a voice and those who feel disenfranchised and helpless. The Distinctive Deacon can challenge such injustices, based on evidence gathered through pastoral outreach. In this way the Deacon is not just restricted to private advice, but is sufficiently well-informed to speak publicly with confidence.

Principles theological and practical

At the center of this ministry is the importance of speaking theologically on public issues. Whilst politics and religion are often seen to be opposites, the truth is that one can inform the other.

Such a model of diaconal ministry is based on the following principles:

- a theological renewal of the understanding of what the Distinctive Diaconate represents, encouraging debate within dioceses and central church structures.

- a focus on the role of the Distinctive Deacon as one who is called to a ministry of service within the wider community, affirmed and sponsored by both the parish community and the diocese. The Deacon has a go-between role.
- the encouragement of Deacons to become theologically-focused on the importance of contextual mission, leading to reflection and action on social need. This means not just setting up a food bank, but also asking why individuals and families are hungry. It demands critical analysis of the political and economic issues, and finding or creating evidence-based reports which include suggestions for creative policies that offer solutions. The Deacon is well-informed on the issues.
- a contribution to policy recommendations that is grounded in theological as well as political analysis, ensuring that the voice of the Church is not seen as just another pressure group with ‘an axe to grind!’ The Deacon is a voice on behalf of the voiceless.
- an understanding of the political dynamics that underpin everyday life. This means being sufficiently theologically-literate to take an informed, active part in political campaigns against injustice. In this role the Deacon acts as prophet.
- the freedom to challenge what Deacons perceive to be unjust both within and outside the institution of the church. This is the uncomfortable ministry of being ‘gadflies’, pricking the bubbles of complacency that exist in so many institutions.

Ecumenical and European partnerships

This model of a Distinctive Diaconate is well-established in parts of Europe. The Lutheran tradition includes Deacons whose ministry is focused in the social welfare arena, also fundamental to the Nordic diaconate.

In addition, Eurodiaconia makes an important contribution to debates on a wide range of public policy issues discussed in the European Parliament. It is a ‘European network of 46 churches and Christian NGOs providing social and health care services and advocating social justice’: www.eurodiaconia.org

Conclusion

The model outlined above builds on the ministry of the whole Church, from bishops to congregational members. It is not my intention to lose sight of the tradition of clergy playing an important role in the civic and public life of the community. Equally the tradition of both lay and ordained ministry in the work place and wider community has a long and important history and a crucial part to play. But in all that faces the Church of England of the 21st century, it is imperative that we do not lose sight of the importance of the challenge in the public square.

The vital contribution of the Distinctive Deacon is to follow the example of Isaiah who was a servant of the royal court, and Amos the shepherd from the hills of Tekoa. They both brought a message that

questioned the status quo of their time and stood against injustice and oppression. 21st century Deacons are still called to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak truth to power.

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More about Deacon Terry

The Rev Deacon Terry Drummond has been in full-time ministry for forty-four years. He served first as a commissioned Church Army Officer, and was given the title of Evangelist by Archbishop Michael Ramsey in 1972. His ministry has focused on much of what he includes in this paper, working on a housing estate and with the homeless. This was followed by nine years with responsibility for non-residential social work and policy development for the Church Army, followed by a year seconded to the Inner Cities Unit of the government.

He spent fifteen years working with local churches and the local authority in responding to social needs in Croydon, then ten years in stipendiary employment as Bishop's Chaplain and four years as Bishop's Adviser on Urban and Public Policy.

In 2016 he was ordained as a Distinctive Deacon in the diocese of Southwark. The joy of ordination affirmed his life's ministry with the authorization of the Church into an Order which offers support to the Bishop and the whole people of God. It is Terry's hope that the Distinctive Deacon will bring to the wider ministry of the church both focus and support, as the Body of Christ works out its prophetic *diakonia* in the public square.

At Terry's commissioning, he was given a text from St Paul:

Grow not weary in well doing for in due season you will reap the harvest Galatians 6:9

A verse for all Distinctive Deacons, perhaps.

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