

What's in a Word? Diakonia and Deacons in the Bible and Today

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Drawing upon a revised interpretation of diakon- terms in the New Testament provided by John N. Collins, this paper examines how the stories of the choosing of the seven (Acts 6:1-7), Stephen's speech (Acts 6:8 – 7:56), and the evangelistic ministry of Phillip (Acts 8:4-40) together provide a fresh impetus for understanding expressions of the United Methodist diaconate today. It is suggested that these stories offer fertile ground for crafting a "rule" for the United Methodist diaconate as a missionary Order.

Introduction

"The diaconate is at the same time the most problematic and the most promising of all the ministries of the Church."¹ There are many reasons for this; deacons' and deaconesses' work in the world and their relationships within the Church are such that they embody many of the key theological and missiological challenges of the Church today.² Careful thinking, therefore, about the role of the diaconate – in both its lay and ordained forms – in the United Methodist Church is especially important because it has clear implications for how ministry and mission are understood and expressed in the church today.

Considerable theological ambiguity on the nature of ministry in the UMC lurks behind a question posed at the 2012 General Conference as to whether deaconesses and home missionaries may rightly be understood as a "lay order" in the United Methodist Church. There is little which is ostensibly problematic – either historically or theologically – about designating deaconesses and home missionaries as members of a "lay order." Mid-twentieth century ministry studies in the Methodist (and United Methodist) Church may have proscribed the designation of "lay order" for deaconesses or anyone else, but ample historic precedent for designating deaconesses and home missionaries as a lay order may be found in other Methodist groups throughout history.³ Lay orders of persons in Roman Catholic religious communities are, of course, common as well. Theologically, in the New Testament the term which in English is translated "order" is used to

¹ Paul Avis, "Editorial: Wrestling with the Diaconate," *Ecclesiology* 5(2009): 3. In this paper, when I refer to "the diaconate" in the United Methodist Church my intent is to be inclusive of deaconesses, home missionaries and ordained (permanent) deacons in the UMC.

² Andrew Orton, "The Diverse and Contested Diaconate: Why Understanding this Ministry is Crucial to the Future of the Church" *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2 (2012); Andrew Orton and Todd Stockdale, "Missional engagement? The practical theology and ethics of 'good practice' for deacons in the Methodist Church in Britain," paper presented at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies (Oxford, England, 2013). Orton and Stockdale's paper is available at the Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies website: <http://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2013-4-orton.pdf> Accessed on 15 September 2014.

³ The theological basis for restricting the term "order" for ordained persons in the UMC needs revisiting. Richard Heitzenrater's review of ministry studies from 1948 to 1986 is quite revealing for the confusion which has existed in our church on these matters. The use of the term "order" was a topic of discussion in the 1952, 1964, and 1980 ministry study commissions. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "A Critical Analysis of the Ministry Studies Since 1948," in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville Kingswood Books, 1993). Precedent for describing deaconesses as a lay order in the Methodist Church in the UK extends at least as far back as 1890 with the Wesleyan Church and a year later in the United Methodist Free Church. These two bodies in the UK merged to become the Methodist Union in 1932 and the Wesley Deaconess Order remained in that new denomination. See *The Wesley Deaconess Order of the Methodist Church*, (1949). In the Methodist Episcopal Church in the US the term "order" was frequently utilized, but it is difficult to discern how important such a designation was for deaconesses in describing their work. In their founding period they seemed to speak of themselves more in terms of a community than an "order." For a review of the use of the term "order" in the deaconess movement see Sarah Lancaster, "Deaconess: Order and Office," Paper presentation, Lay Order Conference, 26-28 September 2014.

describe a priestly class Zechariah was a part of (Luke 1:8) and, in the letter to the Hebrews, to the order of Melchizedek.⁴ An “order” in this case was utilized to designate persons carrying out important work with a mandate from the community – a properly understood *ministry* as I will discuss below. One might still raise questions about whether the term is helpful, however, as it may be deemed “old fashioned” or too “high church” by some; to speak of deaconess and home missioner “covenant communities” may be more appealing than to speak of order.

While I do not see the designation “lay order” for deaconesses and home missionaries to be theologically problematic itself, I do believe that such designation raises deeper questions about the nature of ministry in the United Methodist Church.⁵ Again, the diaconate embodies theological challenges the Church as a whole must face. The locus of the problem is not primarily with the diaconate, even if the diaconate may sometimes serve as a convenient scapegoat for the problem. Ministry Study Commissions of the past fifty years and a recent “resource paper” by the UMC Committee on Faith and Order reveal the trajectory of ecclesiological reflection in the UMC.⁶

In spite of these challenges in our denomination – and perhaps even because of them – I remain profoundly hopeful about this meeting for what it may contribute. United Methodist deaconesses have a long tradition of challenging established structures, and it may very well be that this gathering in 2014 will lead to re-assessments of the nature of ministry in the UMC which will reverberate in the denomination for some time to come. Deaconesses have initiated similar re-assessments of ministry before – and not only in their founding period in the late 1880s. Former Board of Higher Education and Ministry Associate General Secretary and Boston University Dean of Chapel Robert W. Thornburg (1927-2013) noted that it was at a 1973 meeting of the Office of Deaconesses that “the United Methodist Church, through a small and marginalized group of its most faithful servants, began to be confronted by THE CHALLENGE of a genuinely radical alteration in its plan for and thinking about the nature of ministry and the ordained [emphasis in the original].”⁷ Indeed, it was in the decade between 1968 and 1976 that a seismic shift took place in western denominations – including the UMC – about the very definition of ministry. Namely, this shift was from ministry defined as something largely done by ordained persons toward ministry understood as something done by all Christians by virtue of their baptism (*Book of Discipline* 2012 ¶126-132).⁸ A shift is again needed today, although I believe it should proceed in a different way from what occurred in the 1970s.

In the remainder of this paper I propose a way forward in our denomination’s thinking about ministry more generally and the ministry of the diaconate specifically. It is important to both clarify theological

⁴ Diedra Kriewald, “Ministerial Formation: Laos and Diaconia,” (Wesley Theological Seminary, 1998), 3. Kriewald’s paper was delivered at a symposium in Nashville sponsored by the GBHEM in 1998. I attended this meeting, but I do not recall what it was entitled. I do recall that there was considerable excitement about the recovery of a sense of “order” to ordained persons in the UMC in response to Professor Kriewald’s address. However, in the fifteen years since that conference the embrace of an Order self-understanding among Elders in the UMC has been lukewarm at best.

⁵ All of this is complicated linguistically by United Methodist nomenclature whereby persons speak of receiving “Deacon’s Orders” or “Elder’s Orders” at ordination. For a more detailed discussion of the two uses of the term “order” in the UMC see Sarah Lancaster, “Deaconess: Order and Office,” Paper presentation, Lay Order Conference, 26-28 September 2014.

⁶ In addition to Heitzenrater’s review of mid-to-late 20th century ministry studies cited above, other instructive treatments of ministry in the Methodist tradition which are frequently overlooked include Gerald O. McCulloh, ed. *The Ministry in the Methodist Heritage* (Nashville: Department of Ministerial Education, Division of Educational Institutions, Board of Education, The Methodist Church, 1960); W. R. Ward, “The Legacy of John Wesley: The Pastoral Office in Britain and America,” in *Faith and Faction*, ed. W. R. Ward (London: Epworth Press, 1993). Most recently, see The UMC Committee on Faith and Order, “United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching on the Nature, Mission and Faithfulness of the Church,” (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2013).

⁷ Robert Watts Thornburg, “The Story of the Challenge,” (Boston: Boston University School of Theology, 1984?).

⁸ Richard Heitzenrater notes that from 1968 to 1976 “the loudest voices in the [ministry study] commission and at General Conference shifted from talking about ministry as being valid only in the light of ordination to talking about ministry as being open to all in the light of their baptism.” Heitzenrater, “A Critical Analysis of the Ministry Studies Since 1948,” 437. John N. Collins recounts a similarly dramatic shift in the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies in their understanding of ministry. See John N. Collins, “Theology of Ministry in the Twentieth Century: Ongoing Problems or New Orientations,” *Ecclesiology* 8(2012).

ambiguity which has led to the challenge posed to deaconesses and home missionaries at the 2012 General Conference and to inspire theological imagination about what Paul Avis describes as “the most promising of all the ministries of the Church.”⁹ I do this first by revisiting an argument made a decade ago in an article I wrote for the *Quarterly Review*.¹⁰ That article contextualizes for United Methodists the ground-breaking linguistic work of John N. Collins. His linguistic insights on the New Testament terms for ministry (*diakonia*, *diakoneo*, *diakonos*, etc.) first published in 1990 have gained considerable traction among theologians and church leaders in Anglican, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic circles – but not United Methodist ones – since the publication of that QR article in 2004.¹¹

If Collins’s linguistic analysis is true then key biblical texts which have been important to the diaconate deserve fresh examination as sources for theological imagination *vis-à-vis* the ministry of the diaconate. In the second part of the paper, I focus on three stories from the Acts of the Apostles (the choosing of the seven in Acts 6 and the stories of Stephen and Philip) for what they suggest to us about the shape the diaconate may take in the church today and in the future. There are, of course, other dimensions of these stories which are instructive for reasons unrelated to Collins’s research which I discuss as well. I emphasize most strongly the missiological dimension in these stories for what it suggests for the United Methodist diaconate. There are, after all, few places in the Bible which accentuate the missionary calling of the early Christian community more than the Acts of the Apostles. The origin of the United Methodist Office of Deaconesses in Germany and India and (until 2012) its administrative location within the UMC’s General Board of Global Ministries also infuses the UMC diaconate and the Office of Deaconesses and Home Missioners in particular with a strong missionary identity.¹²

Rethinking Diakonia

Candidates for provisional Annual Conference membership in the UMC are routinely asked to describe their “understanding of *diakonia*, the servant ministry of the church, and the servant ministry of the provisional member (*Book of Discipline*, ¶324.9).” As a member of a Board of Ordained Ministry for a few years I have noticed that nearly all candidates answer this question by emphasizing the ethical mandate for humble service which they perceive to be especially important for commissioned elders or deacons as ethical exemplars in the Church.¹³ I believe this question and its typical answers to be a problem for at least two reasons. First, In the United Methodist Church today there may be a danger of reducing ministry (*diakonia*) to

⁹ Avis, "Editorial: Wrestling with the Diaconate," 3.

¹⁰ Benjamin L. Hartley, "Connected and Sent Out: Implications of New Biblical Research for the United Methodist Diaconate," *Quarterly Review* 24, no. 4 (2004). I worked with Collins’s research in other writing projects as well. See ———, "Deacons as Emissary-Servants: A Liturgical Theology," *Quarterly Review* (1999); Ben L. Hartley and Paul Van Buren, *The Deacon: Ministry through Words of Faith and Acts of Love* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1999). Former Associate General Secretary in the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry Paul E. Van Buren also highlighted John N. Collins’s research in an unpublished address at Iliff Seminary in 1997. See Paul E. Van Buren, "Footnotes to the Ministry of the Deacon," (Nashville: Section of Deacons and Diaconal Ministry, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1997).

¹¹ The published articles and books in the last decade in the English language which best summarize the impact of John N. Collins’s linguistic research on the biblical term *diakonia* and its cognates are Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); John N. Collins, "Ordained and Other Ministries: Making a Difference," *Ecclesiology* 3, no. 1 (2006); Paula Gooder, "Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins," *Ecclesiology* 3, no. 1 (2006). Collins’s detailed linguistic study was first published in John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹² On this early history see Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Benjamin L. Hartley, "Salvation and Sociology in the Methodist Episcopal Deaconess Movement," *Methodist History* 40, no. 3 (2002).

¹³ I have posted on my website <http://missionandmethodism.net/umc-resources/> an extensive annotated bibliography (which I encourage others to modify and improve) keyed to each of the questions in ¶324.9. to encourage depth of analysis in my students and (more surreptitiously) increased theological acumen in Boards of Ordained Ministry. I tell my students to read at least one article by John N. Collins (or my own article which discusses his work) in order to intelligently answer the question about *diakonia* and the question about a theology of ordination.

an ethical commitment to service which downplays the rich spiritual depth the gathered church community provides in its corporate celebrations of Word and Sacrament where Jesus' ministry is portrayed and made mysteriously present. Jesus' ministry involves far more than moral earnestness; I fear that this question in the *Book of Discipline* promotes such reductionism.¹⁴ The second problem with this question is that it presents a definition of a Greek term that is at best limited in its accuracy. Very few people in our denomination recognize that the scholarship on the *diakon-* terms (*diakonia*, *diakoneo*, *diakonos*, etc.) has shifted since 1990 such that the term is no longer so easily equated with lowly, humble, service in which all Christians are nonetheless called to engage as Jesus' disciples.

The differences between the older understanding of *diakon-* words and the newer interpretation may be succinctly expressed by comparing the definitions of the term in Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon in the 2nd edition (sometimes denoted by the initials of its authors as BAGD, 1979) with the 3rd edition (BDAG, 2000).

Comparison of Definitions of <i>diakoneo</i> in the New Testament in Bauer's Greek-English lexicon ¹⁵	
BAGD 2 nd edition (1979)	BDAG 3 rd edition (2000)
1) Wait on someone at table	1) To function as an intermediary, act as a go-between/agent, be at one's service with intermediary function either expressed or implied.
2) Serve generally, of services of any kind	2) To perform obligations, without focus on intermediary function
3) Care for, take care of	3) To meet an immediate need, help
4) Help, support someone	4) To carry out official duties, minister. Rendering of specific assistance, aid, support (Acts 6:1); send someone something for support (Acts 11:29)
5) Of the ecclesiastical office serve as deacon	5) Acts 6:2 poses a special problem: care for, take care of... "look after tables" can be understood of serving food at tables... but it is improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal meal. The term <i>diakonia</i> (verse 1) more probably refers to administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows without specifying the kind of assistance that is allotted.

¹⁴ William R. Burrows, *New Ministries: The Global Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980). 69.

¹⁵ The table above is a much-abbreviated depiction of an extensive comparison in two editions of a Greek-English lexicon which also contains definitions of other *daikon-* cognates such as *diakonia* and *diakonos*. For serious examination of these definitions please consult Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 229; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). 184. For John N. Collins's commentary and comparison of the BDAG's 2nd and 3rd editions see the unpublished paper John N. Collins, "Diakonia and the New Greek Lexicon, BDAG," (2000). I have this paper in my personal files. See also Gooder, "Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins," 46-47.

There are three insights which are critical in this shift of *diakon*-word definitions in the New Testament.¹⁶ First, there has been a significant change in understanding these terms for ministry such that their field of meaning is increasingly focused on intermediary or emissarial relationships of persons and less on the caring, ethical, nature of the acts performed, such as in taking care of or helping someone.¹⁷ It is the relationship with and to the church that is critical to recover here *not* the officious status which may be associated with terms such as emissary or ambassador. Ministry is something that is given to someone by the church; calling something “my ministry” is thus, strictly speaking, an oxymoron.¹⁸ Ministry is something which the Church may give to an individual (whether lay or ordained) as a public expression of the Church’s mission in the world. Something could be designated a ministry through an informal public approval or through a service of ordination; the point is that the work is in some way accountable to the Church. In this regard, I believe that the language of “lay order” for deaconesses, home missionaries, or a restored “class leader” may be helpful because it theologically accentuates an accountable, emissarial, and apostolic relationship to the Church.¹⁹ (This is especially the case if the use of the phrase carries with it the long history of missionary orders as the term does for me but unfortunately does not for most United Methodists.)

Second, as already suggested, the revised definition of *diakon*-terms introduces a greater focus on the missionary meaning of the term such that *diakonos* (minister) is more closely related to *apostolos* (messenger) than our previous understanding of *diakon*-terms have tended to permit with its focus on lowly, humble, service.²⁰ Paula Gooder has underscored that the *diakon*-terms still maintain a sense of menial service in some New Testament passages. However, even when menial service is emphasized as part of a minister’s vocation it is still very much related to the minister’s emissarial relationship to an authority – and ultimately to Christ as his missionary.²¹ At a personal level, a more apostolic understanding of a minister’s vocation may further guard against an unhealthy victim complex whereby one perceives oneself as a burned-out servant of the people more than a sent emissary of God. I believe that the old understanding of *diakonia* and (for United Methodists) the attendant ubiquitous “servant leader” language in the *Book of Discipline* is especially vulnerable to such a distortion of ministry – especially if it is left ambiguous whose servant one is.²²

¹⁶ For a more thorough examination of these and other ecclesiological issues stemming from these insights about reinterpreting *diakonia* see Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*: 43-87; Robert Hannaford, "Foundations for an Ecclesiology of Ministry," in *Order and Ministry*, ed. Christine Hall and Robert Hannaford (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 1996); John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002); ———, *Are All Christians Ministers?* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

¹⁷ I have only included the verb *diakoneo* in the table above but similar contrasts are evident in related terms *diakonos* and *diakonia*.

¹⁸ Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*: 46. A fruitful trajectory of reflection to explore here would be the interrelationship between vocation and ministry – for pastors and others. One helpful example of the many books in this vein is Victor Hunter, *Desert Hearts and Healing Fountains: Gaining Pastoral Vocational Clarity* (St. Louis: MO: Chalice Press, 2003). A more scholarly assessment of the diversity of interpretations of vocation over the centuries is William C. Placher (ed), *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹⁹ See the fine paper by David Lowes Watson on restoring the ministry of the “class leader” in United Methodism. David Lowes Watson, “Toward an Order of the Laity: An Extract from Presentations at the 2012 Wesleyan Leadership Conference,” Lay Order Conference, 26-28 September 2014. Paragraphs pertaining to deaconesses and home missionaries in the *Book of Discipline* already accentuate the accountable nature of deaconesses’ and home missionaries’ ministries. I am using the term “apostolic” here in a theological sense to convey the primacy of mission. I am not using the term in a historical sense to refer to “apostolic succession” from the disciples. See also the helpful discussion by Russell E. Richey on the meaning of “apostolic” in a Methodist framework in Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

²⁰ For studies of the biblical meaning of *apostolos* as a concept and office in the Church see Walter Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969); Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative: Nature and Aim of the Church's Mission and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1985).

²¹ Gooder, "Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins," 48.

²² There are, of course, other problems with the ubiquitous “servant leadership” language introduced in the 1996 *Book of Discipline* which would require another paper to discuss more thoroughly. The weaknesses of the Church as Servant model and, by extension, “servant leadership” rhetoric have been discussed by theologians as well as leadership theorists. See, for example, Avery Dulles,

Instead, what is emphasized in the revised understanding of *diakonia* – and, of course, elsewhere in the New Testament – is that one can be radically free to perform menial and self-sacrificial missionary service precisely because of the “high calling” and close emissarial relationship and friendship one may have as a *diakonos* or minister of Jesus.

In a similar way, the older definition of *diakonia* has contributed to wider problematic ecclesial self-understandings. The missionary impulse of the reign of God does not consist in a timid humility of a “let the world set the agenda” variety as the World Council of Churches proclaimed in 1968. In this appeal the WCC was motivated in part by a well-intentioned desire to correct the abuses of ecclesiastical hubris. The diaconate was seen as a vehicle to accomplish this in the Church.²³ Indeed, ecclesiastical hubris must be rejected, but in doing so one must not be dismissive of the Church.²⁴ An embrace of a revised definition for *diakon-* terms, while of course not refuting true Christian humility, may help the diaconate (and the Church as a whole) embrace the radical missionary values of God’s reign whereby the whole Church brings the whole Christ to the whole world.²⁵ Deacons, deaconesses, and home missionaries cross boundaries with and for the Gospel;²⁶ they do not follow an ambiguous or secular “world” which calls the shots for its lowly servants.²⁷

A third insight which may be garnered from this new definition of *diakon-* terms is best framed in a negative way: Ministry is not synonymous with activities of Christian discipleship. The United Methodist ministry study commission in 1976 followed a wider ecumenical trend which had been occurring at least since the 1950s in expanding the meaning of ministry to the service of all baptized believers.²⁸ This resulted in

Models of the Church, Expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1987). 98-100; Mitch McCrimmon, "Why servant leadership is a bad idea," management-issues.com, <http://www.management-issues.com/opinion/6015/why-servant-leadership-is-a-bad-idea/>. Accessed on 19 July 2014.

²³ The early initiatives to restore the permanent diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church are expressions of this motive. Margret Morche tells the moving story of how ideas for a post-war church took shape in cell block 26 of the Dachau concentration camp. See Margret Morche, *Zur Erneuerung des Ständigen Diakonats: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Arbeit des Internationalen Diakonatszentrums in seiner Verbindung zum Deutschen Caritasverband* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Lambertus Verlag, 1996). 28-29.

²⁴ For a good discussion of this see Robert Hannaford, “The Representative and Relational Nature of Ministry and the Renewal of the Diaconate” in *The Ministry of the Deacon 2: Ecclesiological Explorations* edited by Gunnel Borgegard, Olav Fanuelson and Christine Hall, (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Ecumenical Council, 2000), 239-279.

²⁵ Of course, in a very important sense it is not the Church that brings Christ to places and people where he is totally absent. Nor is it the case that the Church is equated with God’s reign. The Church participates in God’s mission through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet Christians affirm that the Church is also far from being merely incidental in accomplishing God’s mission in the world. See, for example, ¶ 120-125 of the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012).

²⁶ I am exceedingly conscious of the fact that such language of “boundary crossing” and even the term “missionary” is received by some persons as linguistic remnants of a colonialist enterprise. I disagree even though I also believe that much theological discourse about boundaries and mission needs to be reframed in light of insights gained from postcolonial theory and other sources. I have found David Bosch’s essay on the “vulnerability of mission” to be especially useful in my teaching in this regard. Bosch notes that “the activities of adherents of any religion which holds that it has a message of universal validity will invoke images of paternalism. And since the Christian faith, as I have suggested, is intrinsically missionary, it will often be experienced as paternalistic even where it is not. This is, if you wish, simply an “occupational hazard” of Christian missionaries.” David J. Bosch, “The Vulnerability of Mission,” in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 83. Among United Methodists, Hendrik Pieterse provides a helpful discussion of the way our denomination uses theological language as a worldwide church. With regard to “boundaries,” for example, he argues they ought to be seen “as gift, not threat – as sites of fresh theological insight and spaces of transformative encounter with God in the neighbor.” Hendrik R. Pieterse, “A Worldwide United Methodist Church? Soundings toward a Connectional Theological Imagination” *Methodist Review* 5 (2013), 17.

²⁷ Paul’s description of himself and others as slaves (*doulos*) of Christ highlights an honorific element alongside the menial in a similar way to the revised definition of *diakon-* terms. Dale Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

²⁸ For a helpful review of the ecumenical shift which took place with regard to the use of the term *diakonia* see Collins, “Theology of Ministry in the Twentieth Century: Ongoing Problems or New Orientations.” For the United Methodist embrace of this shift see Heitzenrater, “A Critical Analysis of the Ministry Studies Since 1948,” 437. For an example of the expansive use of the term *diakonia*

nearly everything being identified as a ministry with little left to be considered a matter of Christian discipleship. Loving one's neighbor, caring for the poor, and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ are activities all Christians ought to do as a matter of their discipleship and are not necessarily ministries – although they could be. As Paul Avis argues, all baptized Christians are *potential* ministers even if not all Christians are, by virtue of their baptism, ministers.²⁹ As ecclesially accountable leaders in this work, deacons, deaconesses, and home missionaries are called to encourage and support the serious discipleship of others whether their activities are recognized by the Church (and therefore ministry) or not.

In United Methodist circles today it has become practically impossible to counter the “all Christians are ministers” doctrine. It is rather exuberantly and frequently expressed in the *Book of Discipline*. If the United Methodist Church were to rethink this doctrine in light of considerable consensus regarding *diakon-*terms as Anglican and Lutheran bodies have begun to do it must also carefully articulate what is *not* being said.³⁰

First, a more focused use of the term “ministry” that is distinct from Christian discipleship and involves ecclesial acknowledgment is not an argument for thinking more narrowly about ministry or God's mission in the world. Quite the contrary, to provide greater focus and increased ecclesial accountability to what we call “ministry” – and the diaconate, in particular – gives clarity to the high calling of the Church as a participant in God's mission in the world. The early church in Corinth perhaps had a similar problem in their efforts to make sense of a variety of gifts and ministries. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians preoccupied with one-upmanship used the metaphor of the human body to describe the diversity of gifts given to God's people, to clarify ministry as a distinct category, and to prioritize love in all things.³¹ Similarly, to emphasize the emissarial and apostolic dimensions of *diakon-* words in our understanding of ministry today can bring focus to the United Methodist Church's missiological self-understanding.³² The diaconate's involvement in the church's liturgy can help to bring such a missional focus into the center of the church's self-understanding in a way analogous to the function of early Methodist class leaders in the 18th and 19th centuries.³³

Second, a focused and accountable interpretation of ministry must not be construed as a conceptualization of ministry which is the exclusive prerogative of ordained or otherwise formally consecrated persons. Once again, as Paul Avis has argued, all Christians are best seen as *potential* ministers. I believe that such an interpretation of ministry should raise to a priority all activities and persons which congregations or Conferences deem a ministry.³⁴ In the early history of Methodism the expectations laid on all people in those most dynamic years of the movement were such that they did indeed see themselves as set apart for ministry by virtue of the fact they were Methodists. Albet Outler argues that Wesley even understood the Methodist movement as a kind of holiness-focused religious order within the Church of England.³⁵ Today, I do not think this is the case nor can it be wished or decreed into existence. It is a diminishment of ministry to describe persons who are only nominally engaged in the life of the church as ministers *ipso facto*. The

see Klaus Poser, ed. *Diakonia 2000: Called to be Neighbours, Official Report, WCC World Consultation Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, Larnaca, 1986* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987).

²⁹ Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*: 52.

³⁰ For an example of how the Church of England has sought to come to terms with this research see General Synod of the Church of England, *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001).

³¹ For Collins's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12: 4-7 see John N. Collins, "Ministry as a Distinct Category among Charismata (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7)," *Neotestamentica* 27, no. 1 (1993).

³² Dana L. Robert and Douglas D. Tzan, "Traditions and Transitions in Mission Thought," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 446.

³³ How the modern day United Methodist diaconate could play a similar ecclesiological role to the one played by Methodist class leaders early in our history is a rich trajectory for reflection which David Lowes Watson also highlights in "Toward an Order of the Laity: An Extract from Presentations at the 2012 Wesleyan Leadership Conference."

³⁴ A similar argument was made for nonwestern Roman Catholic contexts decades ago by Bill Burrows. Burrows, *New Ministries: The Global Context*. On the value of expanding the diaconate to include a whole range of ministries including that of women deacons in the Roman Catholic Church see John N. Collins, "Fitting Lay Ministries into a Theology of Ministry," *Worship* (2005): 221.

³⁵ See Sarah Lancaster's discussion of this in "Deaconess: Order and Office," Paper presentation, Lay Order Conference, 26-28 September 2014,

expansion in recent decades of a whole assortment of certified, consecrated, and ordained ministries may be viewed as recognition that all Christians are potential ministers, and the church has acted to create the structures of accountability to make those ministries vital.³⁶

Finally, this understanding of ministry ought not limit individual initiative or prophetic response to world problems which the church may be slow to sanction as its ministry. Indeed, in the New Testament – and in the Acts of the Apostles in particular – there are ministries which are contentious in the church but for which eventually the Holy Spirit brought a measure of clarity.³⁷ The office of deaconess itself is an example of a new ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church which is indebted to the individual initiative of people like Lucy Rider Meyer, Isabella Thoburn, and Iva Durham Vennard who faced opposition in the denomination but who nonetheless persisted in their calling even when it did not always receive acknowledgment from the church as ministry.³⁸

This paper has thus far focused on a reinterpretation of New Testament terms for ministry which have implications which extend beyond but also include the United Methodist diaconate. Were members of the diaconate in the United Methodist Church to emphasize this reinterpretation of the *diakon*-terms in the New Testament, I believe it could spur the theological imagination of United Methodists to revive the apostolic dimension of ministry in our own day. Reflection on the shape of ministry as it was expressed in New Testament stories – to which I now turn – is similarly not for members of the diaconate alone to consider but can help all of us see with new eyes the ministry to which God’s people have been called.

“Deacons” in the Book of Acts

There are many places one could go in Scripture to reflect theologically on the nature of the diaconate, but Acts is especially fruitful for several reasons. First, in Acts Luke describes how and why early Christians established what we (somewhat anachronistically) vaguely recognize as church offices, and we are given insight as to how those ecclesial roles were established. Second, unlike the Pauline epistles (Philippians 1:1; Timothy 3: 8-13) which briefly mention deacons or discuss the qualities of deacons, it is only in Acts that we gain insight into what persons whom the early church in retrospect called deacons actually did. Third, even though Acts focuses on the ministries of the apostle Paul rather than Stephen and Philip, they are nonetheless minor heroes in Acts. Precisely because of their “minor hero” status they are worthy of special attention. Finally, the story of the choosing of the seven in Acts 6:1-7, the brief prophetic ministry of Stephen (Acts 6:8 – 7:60), and the evangelistic ministry of Philip (Acts 8: 4-40) are instructive for the way they illustrate the church moving beyond its boundaries. The church is always called to reflect on how it might do this more creatively.

In the reflections on these passages which follow I briefly point out how these stories may be helpful to members of the UMC diaconate as resources for reflecting on their identity and activities in the church. In doing so, I do not intend in the least to use such stories as proof-texts for how we must do likewise today. In seeking clarification for ecclesial offices, orders, or ordination one must not interpret Scripture anachronistically; ecclesial offices took on a very different shape in the first century than they do today. The shape of ministry today should be grounded in Scripture but not bound by it. That said, it is nonetheless the

³⁶ In my view, United Methodists have yet to adequately answer the question about what, precisely, the difference is between ordained and lay ministries in the United Methodist Church. I believe that Collins’s research on *diakonia* provides a starting point to pursue this question in a fruitful way, but to do so is beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁷ Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*: 56-57.

³⁸ Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

case that members of the diaconate must continually reflect upon Scripture as they discern the Spirit's guidance for their vocation.³⁹

Acts 6: 1-7

While the early church recognized “the seven” – including Stephen and Philip – as deacons in the second century nowhere in Acts are they described this way.⁴⁰ The office of deacon was likely established in the early church at the time of Luke's writing of Acts, but he did not in hindsight impose that title on “the seven” himself. This portion of Scripture has nonetheless remained important over the centuries for members of the diaconate much as the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet has served as an iconic story for their reflections about their vocations.⁴¹

Acts 6:1-7 is a story about a spirit-led act of community discernment to address a new problem in their midst. The community determined that they needed to organize themselves differently to address the problem. They did this, perhaps for the first time, in a way Jesus himself had not established.⁴² They boldly followed the Spirit's guidance in choosing “the seven” to meet the needs of the Hellenistic widows. The first lesson to draw from this story is that of the Holy Spirit leading the fledgling Christian community to nimbly move in a new direction and the disciples acting boldly in organizing themselves in a new way. In an age where there is much talk of reconfiguring denominational structures it may be helpful to consider the first time the disciples sought to re-organize themselves less than a year after Pentecost.⁴³

It is clear that early Christians neglected the Hellenistic widows in their midst, but the identity of these Hellenistic widows is not obvious, nor does Luke explain how precisely they were neglected. Most scholars agree that the Hellenistic widows were members of diasporic Judaism who returned to Jerusalem as migrants who no longer knew the language or perhaps even the culture of their new home.⁴⁴ The typical interpretation of the widows' and the disciples' problem is that the early Christian community was neglecting the widows in the daily distribution of food. The revised interpretation of *diakon-* terms has brought this interpretation into question. Bauer and Danker's Greek-English lexicon notes that “it is improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal meal.”⁴⁵ If food distribution was not the problem, what was the nature of their neglect of these widows?

John N. Collins provides the following paraphrase of Acts 6:1-7 to stress that the perceived injustice may have been the neglect in providing widows with culturally and linguistically relevant Gospel teaching.

The Greek-speaking members of the community complained against those who spoke Aramaic that their housebound widows were being overlooked in the great preaching (*diakonia*) that was going on

³⁹ Roman Catholic scholars have written most extensively on the use of Scripture in reflection on ecclesial offices. See, for example, Eduard Schillebeeckx, “The Catholic Understanding of Office in the Church,” *Theological Studies* 30(1969): 568-71; Burrows, *New Ministries: The Global Context*: 83-87. A good survey of Luther's understanding of priesthood is B. A. Gerrish, “Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther,” *Church History* 34 (December 1965): 404-22.

⁴⁰ There is a fair amount of scholarly consensus that the seven in Acts 6 were not deacons. See James Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995). 31. Irenaeus is the early church leader who is most frequently cited as among the first to make the connection between deacons he knew about in Lyons and the seven of Acts 6. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New*: 48.

⁴¹ The first reference to the basin and towel in an ordination rite for deacons appears in the third century. See R. Hugh Connolly, ed. *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 148-50. The Methodist Episcopal ordination liturgy for deacons contained a reference to Stephen as early as 1869. See *Ritual of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1869).

⁴² Early in Acts we also learn about a somewhat formal and Spirit-led process for choosing a replacement for Judas. A similar kind of corporate decision-making is also evident in Acts 6.

⁴³ Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New*: 143-44.

⁴⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). 249.

⁴⁵ Bauer and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 230.

day by day in the environs of the Temple. So the Twelve summoned the whole complement of the disciples and said: 'We cannot possibly break off our public proclamation before the huge crowds in the Temple to carry out a ministry (*diakonein*) in the households of these Greek-speaking widows. Brothers, you will have to choose seven men from your own ethnic group who are fully respected, empowered by the Spirit, and equipped for the task. We will then appoint them to the role that needs to be filled. That will mean that the Twelve can get on with attending to worship in the Temple and to our apostolic ministry (*diakonia*) of proclaiming the Word there.⁴⁶

While a thorough exegetical analysis of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper, Collins's interpretation does appear more consistent in light of Luke's focus on the continued spread of the Gospel and evangelistic proclamation, in particular.

The Gospel proclamation focus which is evident in this interpretation of Acts 6:1-8 may be quite unsettling to members of the diaconate who have cherished the traditional interpretation (as I have) of the seven being, in a sense, the first volunteers for an early church soup kitchen. While this may not have been the case, the seven of Acts 6 were nonetheless persons appointed to pay attention to those who were being neglected. The neglect of true and creative evangelism in our own day among a whole host of marginalized persons in the church (not least of which are immigrants as they were in the Acts 6 story) may make this reinterpretation of Acts 6 even more provocative for the United Methodist Church which has perhaps become more at ease (at least rhetorically) with social justice efforts than evangelistic ones.⁴⁷

Acts 6:8 – 7:60

The above interpretation of Acts 6:1-7 not only seems more consistent with the priority Luke previously demonstrates in his attention to the spread of the Gospel in the early church, but it is further strengthened by what happens next in the story. Even in verse seven Luke reports that the "word of God spread" and that the "number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly." Both Stephen and Philip – the only members of the seven chosen men whom we learn anything about in the New Testament – move on not to other efforts in caring for the poor but to ministries as prophet and evangelist.

Stephen's speech may be especially helpful for members of the diaconate to reflect upon. A cherished liturgical role for deacons in the early church and in many churches today is as readers of the Gospel in services of worship. Stephen's speech, similarly, illustrates the importance of paying attention to the way our Story is told. Clearly, Stephen's speech is not a bland retelling of the Hebrews' story, but is one with a particular rhetorical purpose to call God's people back to right living and right worship. Contemporary members of the diaconate in their preaching and reading of the Gospel have the opportunity to do likewise.

Stephen's speech is designed to critique Jews who belonged to the Synagogue of the Freedmen who – like Stephen – were members of the Jewish diaspora. Stephen as well as the Jews he was critiquing were, in a sense, immigrants in Jerusalem, but Stephen was making them feel more uncomfortable than they perhaps already were in their adopted home.⁴⁸ The substance of his critique went to the heart of Judaism; Stephen called for a return to true worship of God which he not so subtly implied was not being done by his accusers. Stephen was not, as some scholars have claimed, a strident critic of all things pertaining to the Temple or the Law. He was, however, a critic of an idolatry of the Temple which refused to see that God was

⁴⁶ Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New*: 58.

⁴⁷ The work of Progressive Era deaconess evangelists among the margins of society which Priscilla Pope-Levison has drawn attention to in her work may be seen as somewhat more contemporaneous exemplars of "the seven" in light of this reinterpretation of Acts 6:1-7. Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era*.

⁴⁸ Paul Hertig, "Dynamics in Hellenism and the Immigrant Congregation: Acts 6:8-8:2," in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Books, 2004), 81.

not confined to that still-holy place.⁴⁹ Members of the diaconate today often play a similar role in their efforts to lead the people of God in true worship and, in the process, to name the idolatries of place which may arise in the church Christians nonetheless still love and seek to be faithful toward.⁵⁰

Stephen pushes still further in his critique of his accusers and, in doing so, is presented by Luke as analogous to Jesus in the events of his trial and execution. There are few people in all the New Testament – other than Jesus – who are praised as lavishly as Stephen. Luke describes Stephen as a wonder-worker, “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,” and one “full of God’s grace and power” (Acts 6: 5, 8, 15). Like Jesus, Stephen condemns his accusers most harshly by exposing the way they too were caught in a process of scapegoating which previous generations had been as well.⁵¹ “Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? (Acts 7: 52)” Luke also has Stephen pointing out that their patriarchs, Jacob and his seven sons, were buried in Shechem which was located in the despised Samaritan region – perhaps a foreshadowing of Philip’s ministry there to be described in Luke’s next chapter. Stephen subversively points out that their fathers’ burial sites (symbolic of God’s holy presence) were located in a place which they thought to be revoltingly unholy (Samaria).⁵²

Members of the diaconate today are similarly called to expose the scapegoating mechanism and to be vigilant on behalf of victims no matter how challenging such advocacy may be. Jesus’ teaching to love our enemies who are similarly viscerally offensive as ancient Samaritans were to other Jews is clear. Members of the diaconate would do well to follow Stephen in discerning when and how scapegoating is taking place and defending victims whom individuals, groups of persons, or society at large would like to scapegoat as persons unambiguously deserving of hatred whether those persons are sex offenders, terrorists, murderers, conservatives, liberals, women or men.⁵³

Finally, while Stephen is hard-hitting in his speech – especially after verse thirty-five – there is evidence that Luke is portraying Stephen as part of a line of reconcilers because of the way Joseph, Moses and ultimately Jesus too are remembered. In verse twenty-four of chapter seven Stephen describes Moses as someone who sought to reconcile one Jew with another. The following verse is especially important as it does not appear in the original Exodus story but states that “Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.” Ben Witherington has argued that “[b]y portraying Moses as a reconciler Luke is indicating that Moses should be seen as an exemplary sage, just as Joseph was, and, later, Jesus and Stephen.”⁵⁴

The theme of reconciliation in Stephen’s speech is suggestive for members of the diaconate who understand themselves as go-betweens or emissaries. The late Episcopal deacon, Richard Pemble, has suggested that the diaconate may in fact be considered “the” ecumenical office in the church by virtue of their go-between or emissarial identity.⁵⁵ Cooperation with other churches for the sake of God’s mission has long been a focus of members of the UMC diaconate. As older ecumenical networks such as the World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches decline there remains a strong need for Christian

⁴⁹ I find Ben Witherington’s nuanced analysis here of Stephen’s relationship to the Law and the Temple helpful. See Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). 258-64.

⁵⁰ On the prophetic role of the diaconate in light of Collins’s linguistic research see Kjell Nordstokke, “The Diaconate: Ministry of Prophecy and Transformation,” in *The Ministry of the Deacon 2. Ecclesiological Explorations*, ed. Gunnel Borgegard, Olav Fanuelson, and Christine Hall (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Ecumenical Council, 2000).

⁵¹ I am indebted to the work of René Girard for his insights on scapegoating in the Bible. For an accessible introduction to his ideas see Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

⁵² Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁵³ Many examples of modern-day scapegoats could be named here. I am also mindful of Rene Girard’s admonition that at a personal level “[t]he only real scapegoats are those we are unable to acknowledge as such.” — — —, *“To Double Business Bound”: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1988). 218.

⁵⁴ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*: 269.

⁵⁵ Richard Pemble, “Is Diaconate “the” Ecumenical Office?,” *Deacon Digest* (1998): 8. Archdeacon Pemble was particularly encouraging to me in my own vocation in and research on the diaconate. It was a moving experience for me to be commissioned as a deacon on the same day as his funeral in May of 2001.

leaders – and perhaps especially members of the diaconate – to craft new ecumenical relationships at local, state, national, and world levels. After Stephen’s death by stoning Luke tells us that “a great persecution” in the church (Acts 8:1) occurred that caused further migration of Jesus followers. This too is suggestive for members of the diaconate to lead the way in raising the awareness of Christians in North America of the plight of persecuted Christians the world over – some of whom still migrate to the United States seeking religious freedom.

There are doubtless many other practical expressions of ministries of reconciliation which could be taken up by members of the diaconate today which may find inspiration from Stephen’s ministry in Acts. For example, some members of the UMC diaconate could serve as peacemakers even within the UMC just as Stephen sought to do in first century Judaism. Some members of the diaconate today could serve not as partisans in denominational debates but as persons who seek to be chaplains in the midst of contentious arguments which are likely to unfold at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon.⁵⁶

Acts 8:4-40

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch follows immediately from Philip’s evangelistic campaign in Samaria which further extends the spread of the Gospel to a people whom Jews in Jerusalem did not really consider Jews nor were they Gentiles. Scholars have described them as, at best, “half-breeds” who worshiped in their own temple on Mt. Gerizim and even had a different Pentateuch.⁵⁷ It appears that Luke places this story in his narrative here both because Philip was a colleague of Stephen’s and because it illustrates the continued expansion of the Gospel beyond the Jerusalem Temple and a more narrow conception of Judaism which many Jews adhered too in contrast to Stephen.

After his ministry in Samaria, Philip’s next missionary calling was to share the Gospel by going to Gaza where the Holy Spirit moved him to listen to and speak with an Ethiopian eunuch. Scholars debate the precise identity of the Ethiopian eunuch, but it is clear that he was a member of the royal court likely from modern-day northern Sudan in a region known as Nubia. He may have even been a Jew as there is ample evidence that Jews lived in that part of Africa for some time. Indeed, to argue that the eunuch was a Gentile runs counter to Luke’s structuring of Acts where the first Gentile convert is clearly described as Cornelius (Acts 10:1 – 11:18). That he purchased what would have been an expensive scroll also suggests he was someone with a robust Jewish faith and a person of financial means.⁵⁸ As a castrated man, however, he would have gone to the Temple in Jerusalem only to be prohibited from entering any part of the Temple except the court of the Gentiles. Philip sharing the Gospel then with the Ethiopian eunuch is an example of the Gospel’s spread not only to the “ends of the earth,” as Nubia symbolized at the time, but also its extension to a person whose social status as a eunuch kept him from worshiping God in the Temple which had not yet become a “house of prayer for all people” (Isaiah 56:3-5).⁵⁹

The story the eunuch is reading in Isaiah is also significant as it echoes Stephen’s speech from a chapter earlier. Stephen told the story of his accusers’ ancestors in their persecution of innocent and righteous prophets. Here, the Ethiopian eunuch is reading of the innocent and righteous “suffering servant” likewise being a victim of violence. Philip – like Stephen – tells the story of God’s people rightly and shares about Jesus in light of this passage from Isaiah. (It is striking that in this story the initiative seems to be more

⁵⁶ I am grateful for Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships Associate Ecumenical Staff Officer Dr. Glen A. Messer’s suggestion in this regard.

⁵⁷ Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem, Volume 2*: 278.

⁵⁸ On the Jewish identity of the Ethiopian eunuch see Keith H. Reeves, “The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Key Transition from Hellenist to Gentile Mission: Acts 8:26-40,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 115-17.

⁵⁹ Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem, Volume 2*: 288.

with the eunuch than with Philip.⁶⁰) Jesus was, of course, not just another innocent victim of mob violence but the anointed one of God himself suffering violence and being resurrected for the sake of his love for all people.⁶¹ It is Jesus even more than the eunuch or Philip whom Luke places at the center of this story. Luke also portrays Philip as imitating Jesus on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24) who likewise revealed the truth of the Scriptures which the grief-stricken disciples – like the Ethiopian eunuch – were unable to see. The boldness which Philip exhibits in this story seems to be something he passed on to his daughters as well who are described as prophets in Acts 21:9

The implications of this story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch are clear for contemporary members of the diaconate. Philip's boldness in joining the eunuch in his chariot and in interpreting the Scriptures should remind members of the diaconate today that their "servant leadership" is first oriented toward being God's emissaries who can discern "the signs of the times" in modern-day scrolls and rightly point to the way of Jesus whether that is in Gaza or Galveston. Philip's boldness was contagious and was something that was passed on to his daughters. Members of the diaconate today must likewise raise up leaders in the next generation who will boldly live out the whole Gospel.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to introduce new ways of thinking about the modern-day diaconate by examining a revised interpretation of *diakon*-terms and by looking carefully at three stories in Acts which feature people in ministry whom the early church identified as deacons. Collins's insights about the *diakon*-terms deserve serious consideration far beyond the narrow scholarly confines of New Testament Studies. Paula Gooder has argued that only on rare occasions do "sea changes in opinion" which Collins's research represents greatly impact the life of the church. She argues that this is one of those occasions.⁶² Should the United Methodist Church take notice of Collins's linguistic research in the years to come it will require some serious reconsideration about a number of aspects of our ecclesiology.⁶³ Careful reconsideration of the three stories discussed in this paper can likewise prompt fresh ecclesiological insights. How might these stories be utilized as touchstones for vocational discernment by current and future members of the diaconate? In what ways do these stories support or counter the way members of the diaconate experience formation for ministry today?

Whether or not deaconesses and home missionaries gain recognition as a "lay order" in the United Methodist Church it would nonetheless be helpful for members of the diaconate to lead the way in crafting a "rule" which would bind them to one another in a way that might highlight insights about the *diakon*-terms from which the whole church could benefit. What stories, ideas, or commitments would today best characterize a "rule" of the lay order of deaconesses and home missionaries or for members of the UMC diaconate as a whole? Thankfully, we do not need to "start from scratch" for such a rule. I know of two efforts in this regard among Methodist deacons. British Methodist deacons already have such a rule in place which has helped to unify their Order.⁶⁴ The Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference Order of Deacon has also crafted a rule which all members (myself included) of the Conference Order of Deacons are asked to sign.

To conclude, I propose the following brief rule which draws from and summarizes the insights from this paper. I do not intend that it be adopted by deaconesses and home missionaries wholesale, but it is

⁶⁰ Stanley H. Skreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness: New Testament Images of Disciples in Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). 142-49.

⁶¹ Utilizing insights from Rene Girard, Gil Bailie focuses on Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997). 42-66.

⁶² Paula Gooder cited in Collins, "Theology of Ministry in the Twentieth Century: Ongoing Problems or New Orientations," 32.

⁶³ The Church of England initially sought to do this some years ago. See General Synod of the Church of England, *For Such a Time as This: A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*.

⁶⁴ Andrew Orton, personal communication, August 2013.

perhaps a place to begin a conversation about what a rule may look like. The following draft of a rule is an adaptation and expansion of ¶1314 in the *Book of Discipline* where it describes the ministry of deaconesses and home missionaries. A more refined rule might expand on the Scriptural references here to include other sources of historical inspiration (Lucy Rider Meyer, etc.) especially germane to members of the UMC diaconate.

As members of the United Methodist diaconate (deaconesses, ordained deacons, and home missionaries) our purpose is to serve as Christ's emissaries (*diakonoí*) in representing God's mission in the world. As such, we are accountable to the church in enabling through education and involvement the full participation of all faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

We deaconesses and home missionaries together with deacons function through diverse forms of accountable service directed toward the world to make Jesus Christ known in the fullness of his mission which summons his followers to ever deeper levels of commitment:

- a) We are committed to alleviating the suffering of all people who are victimized through structures of oppression and neglect. We are inspired by the ministries of Stephen and Philip who did this even when confronting early believers with their scapegoating practices brought about their own death (Stephen) and when their missionary calling involved going to foreign lands people back home would prefer to forget (Philip).
- b) We are committed to eradicating causes of injustice and all that robs life of dignity and worth. We are inspired by the ministry of "the seven" (Acts 6: 1-7) who sought to preach the whole Gospel to whole persons who were being neglected because they were linguistically and culturally different from others and whose social status as widows made them especially vulnerable to impoverishment.
- c) We are committed to facilitate the development of full human potential. We are inspired by the ministry of Philip who saw the potential of an Ethiopian eunuch to receive the fullness of the Gospel even when others had excluded him from the worshiping community.
- d) We are committed to share in building global community through the church universal. We are inspired by the go-between, emissarial understanding of *diakonia* to be an "ecumenical office" which seeks to cooperate with all Christians – especially our brothers and sisters in the diaconate – in witnessing to God's reign throughout the world. We are inspired to tell the story of God's people as Stephen and Philip did in order to proclaim that God is not confined to one particular language, culture, or place. With humility, we are even open to being led by those we thought we were ministering to as Philip was led to boldly baptize the Ethiopian eunuch.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ This rule is an adaptation of the description of the Office of Deaconesses and Home Missioners in the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012*, ¶1314.