Abstract

Currently, Lutherans around the world have diaconates that are both ordained and lay. This paper will explore Lutheran diaconates in Germany (which has both ordained and non-ordained diaconates) and North America where the diaconates are not ordained (although the matter of ordination is presently under discussion in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and the Nordic countries and Brazil where members of the diaconate are ordained. The paper will explore some of the historical reasons for these choices, look at some of the theological and ecclesial underpinnings of recent decisions, and discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of various perspectives. Further, it will present some of the thinking in current documents of the Lutheran World Federation regarding diaconates and diaconal work.

INTRODUCTION

Please be advised at the outset that this paper has serious limitations. I am not a church historian, a systematic theologian nor a liturgical scholar. I am not able to read or speak German, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Portuguese or any other language but English. (Although some of what I have written about the diaconate has been published in German, Finnish and Portuguese.) This means that I have not done research with the same kind of rigor as some scholars might, since, in many cases, I have had to rely on secondary sources and documents in translation. Additionally, there is often a time lag until documents are translated into English resulting in some material being out of date. I have also utilized many personal conversations—some of which have been handicapped by the limitation of language which is not always nuanced in translation.

What I bring to this assignment is a life-long commitment to the church’s diaconal task and over 40 years of involvement with diaconates ecumenically and globally through DIAKONIA World Federation and DIAKONIA of the Americas and Caribbean (DOTAC). Through these connections, I have had access to many diaconal practitioners and some church leaders who have been generous in explaining their approach to the diaconate and answering my questions. I always tell them I am grateful they have done the hard work of learning English so that we can communicate.

I have chosen to write in a somewhat simplified form without footnotes since much of what I write comes from years of personal study and private conversations not always easy to document. In reality what you have in this paper is primarily my understanding of what I have learned and heard.

Around the world in the past several decades, there have been many changes in the diaconates, and the diaconal landscape is still in a state of flux. The traditional forms, for example, European motherhouses, have not attracted young/new members is great number. The large diaconal institutions—hospitals, schools, homes, halfway houses, etc.—were left without enough trained diaconal staff. Especially, the communities of deaconesses found themselves responsible for the care of many elderly sisters. In some countries, the government more and more assumed responsibility for health care and social service work where religious
communities were once serving. In some instances, communities are facing financial challenges. Some of the diaconal communities have simply begun to grow old and fade away. Others are making creative changes in their dress, their rule of life, the forms of service and their relationship to the churches. Many of these changes are bringing new life into these well-established communities.

Renewal of the diaconate has also come from another direction. After the publication in 1982 of *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, many churches around the world began to look again at the diaconate as a way to engage in mission in a changing world and to express in a greater way the unity of the church. Some churches where the diaconate was a transitional state on the way to the presbyterate established or affirmed a permanent diaconate. Other churches looked for ways to bring diaconal communities or orders that had been on the edges of the church’s life more into the center of its ministry. Still others established diaconates as a new form of ministry. The discussions about how best to shape ministry for mission in the world still go on.

Another factor important in the revisioning of the diaconate is the expansion of what *diakonia* means. In the New Testament church, *diakonia* was primarily directed toward those within the fellowship who had special need—widows, orphans, prisoners. Later the concept grew to reaching out to those in the community who had any need—as in the various social welfare movements of the 19th Century. More recently the churches have also come to see that *diakonia* involves addressing structures that impoverish or oppress people. Finally, *diakonia* now is understood to include care of the creation itself. Now the ministry of *diakonia* is not just about giving care or providing aid, although those are still part of the task. *Diakonia* also includes advocacy, speaking prophetically. These shifts in understanding require new ways of shaping the churches’ leadership and public ministry to mobilize the whole people of God for *diakonia*.

It is an exciting time to be church and to be diaconate. How all of this looks is changing even as I write. Some of my sources are several years old. Things may already be different especially in some of the European churches. And here in the US, because the world has changed and because we have new ecumenical partners, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will soon be looking again at the decisions made about the diaconate only twenty years ago. I offer here my perspectives, interpretations and reflections as of the time of writing.

In the first section, I review some of the recent documents on *diakonia* from the Lutheran World Federation and highlight some of the sections that are most pertinent to the discussion of ordering ministries. In the second section, I try to explain some of the Lutheran perspectives of ordination. The third section introduces several Lutheran diaconates using broad strokes to give a flavor of their history and current status. Finally, I end with some personal reflections on the matter of ordering diaconal ministry.

**DIAKONIA AND THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION**

Within the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), as in the World Council of Churches, *diakonia* is the term used for a wide range of ministry ranging from individual care of people in congregations to health and social service institutions to international aid and development. Much of the LWF’s consulting and theologizing over the years has been about diaconal work and not about the diaconate as such. There are, of course, implications for the diaconates arising from the discussions of the theology and practice of *diakonia* as understood by the LWF. I will draw on the three most recent documents.

In preparation for their 2003 Assembly, the LWF convened a group in 2002 around the theme “Prophetic Diakonia—For the Healing of the World.” (“For the Healing of the World” was the theme of the 2003 Assembly.) The consultation focused on three specific areas of human suffering—poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS. They developed a letter to the churches of the LWF which spoke directly to those three areas as well as to *diakonia* in general.

The heart of that letter begins:
Diakonia is central to what it means to be the church. As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship. Diakonia reaches out to all persons, who are created in God’s image. While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms and transforms.

The statement further asserts that this diakonia is the calling of the whole people of God and that it is not an activity of the “haves” toward the “have-nots.” Even the poorest Christians and the poorest churches are called to this ministry, and they can do it. As part of God’s holistic mission, diakonia is interrelated with kerygma (proclamation of the Gospel) and koinonia (sharing at the table of communion). Furthermore, the letter expresses the importance of leadership for diakonia in the churches and encourages incorporating deacons/diaconal ministers/deaconesses in the church’s ministry without taking a position on ordination or not:

Leadership at all levels is essential, leaders who equip all Christians to take up their call to serve. Professionals should not use their expertise in ways that treat those they serve as passive recipients or clients. Churches should initiate and strengthen education for diakonia. As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church’s ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the Church.

The Diaconal Ministry in the Mission of the Church was a consultation convened by the LWF in 2005. (Some of the presentations and reports from that consultation were published in 2006 as a LWF Studies monograph with the same title.) The purpose and intent of the consultation was to look at existing models of ordering diaconal ministry and to try to set parameters for demarcating a “space” where diaconal ministry can be located within the overall ministry of the church. They began with the assumption that however that “space” might be understood, it should be:

- Solidly based on the gospel as testified in the Bible
- Accountable to and informed by basic tenets of the Lutheran Reformation
- Open to contextual variations.

The participants and presentations represented a wide range of churches with a variety of approaches to ordering diaconal ministry.

The final statement of the consultation neither adopted locating the diaconate as a “lay ministry” nor did it affirm the concept of a three-fold ministry of bishop-pastor-deacon. It did, however, advocate for ordaining those called to this ministry as a way of demonstrating that the diaconate is an integral part of the one (public) ministry of the church. At the same time, the statement affirms the “deaconhood of all believers”; that is, the calling of all the baptized to be involved in diakonia. And it points to the importance of seeing the diaconal and pastoral ministries as mutual and complementary while having different emphases.

In 2009, drawing on these two consultations, the LWF published Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment--An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia. This is a rich, comprehensive resource which can be used on all levels of the church. While the main focus of the document is the church’s diaconal mission expressed in many different ways and carried out by a variety of people, it also takes up the matter of ordering the church’s public ministry. It advocates for churches to reexamine how they order ministry and to include the diaconate in their public expression of ministry in ways that are appropriate for their context.
Lutheran Views of Ordination

Lutherans look to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessional writings as the rule and norm of faith and life. Generally they agree that the scriptures do not speak specifically about ordination; rather the scriptures describe a practice of selecting church leaders through prayer and laying on of hands. Those leaders are called by a variety of names and serve many diverse functions within the New Testament.

At the time of the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th Century, the primary concern was the integrity of the message of justification by faith through grace alone, preached and celebrated in the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. While Martin Luther in several places writes about the diaconate as important in the church’s life, especially for care of the poor, the primary Lutheran Confessional writings focus on the ministry of word and sacrament. Ordination is therefore discussed in relation to that ministry without any reference to other ministries that were present in the New Testament, in the early church or in the 16th Century Roman Catholic Church.

The Lutheran confessions assert that ordination is established by God and is seen primarily as the way to ensure that the ministry is carried out in good order. The confessions further leave the matter of church polity completely open.

Ralph Quere, in a presentation in 1981 to the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University, identified three primary strands of church polity—each with a particular emphasis in understanding ordination. An episcopal polity tends to see ordination to “orders of ministry,” as in bishop, presbyter and deacon. A presbyterian polity sees ordination to an “office of ministry.” And a congregational polity understands ordination in relation to “functions of ministry.”

At various times and in various places one or the other of these polities has prevailed in Lutheran churches, and at some times and in some places the churches have operated with a mixture of these understandings and polities. As a consequence, it is not always easy to find a single, clear statement of the Lutheran understanding of ordination. There are, however, several recurring themes arising from the Lutheran confessions:

- An insistence that there is one ministry—of the word or of the gospel
- A suspicion of a hierarchical understanding of ministry
- A caution against any approach that undermines the priesthood of all believers.

Until the 1982 publication of the World Council of Churches document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, and before the ecumenical conversations around that document, Lutherans mostly talked about ordination to the pastorate and the ministry of word and sacrament. (Others—teachers, missionaries, deaconesses and deacons—might be commissioned or consecrated, but not ordained.) The study of BEM and the bilateral and ecumenical conversations about it began to raise questions about the understanding of ministry and the meaning of ordination. Additionally, the discussions raised questions about the role and place of the diaconate in those understandings.

Is there a three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon? Or is there one ministry—of the gospel, expressed and lived out in different ways? Is ministry primarily an order or an office or a function? Is there a fundamental difference between the of rite ordination and rites of commissioning/consecration when the liturgical form is very similar?

Churches within the Lutheran World Federation have wrestled with these questions during the last several decades. They have come to conclusions that fit with their own contexts and understandings of mission. This paper will present several examples of the way Lutheran churches have ordered ministry.
Lutheran Diaconates

GERMANY

Most Lutheran diaconates around the world trace their roots to 19th Century Germany where the advent of the industrial revolution and the end of the Napoleonic wars left the society in upheaval. The wars had left many women widowed and children orphaned without means of support. Additionally many young women were left without prospect of marriage because so many young men were killed at war. The industrial revolution triggered movement to the cities from the small towns and agricultural areas and resulted in poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, rapid spread of disease, and other social ills. Many goods once produced by skilled artisans in guilds were produced by machines. The guilds disintegrated, and people lost the mutual support they provided. Urban families could no longer depend on their extended families and neighbors for care of children and family members who were ill or elderly. The church, once central in the lives of people in villages and towns, became disconnected from people crowded together in the centers of large cities.

Into this milieu, two German Lutherans—Johannas Wichern, a layman, and Theodore Fliedner, a pastor—began to envision a program of social action and evangelism called Inner Mission. (This was to complement the church’s foreign mission which was flourishing in this time of nationalism and colonization.) The vision was to respond to some of the social problems in the cities and at the same time bring the gospel and a deeper spirituality to the lives of people.

Wichern, in 1833, first established houses for boys orphaned by the wars or neglected by families caught in the long hours of factory work. He first set up family-type group homes with a surrogate older brother, Bruder, later called deacon. Wichern and his successors set up training programs for deacons to work in jails, slums and other places of need. Wichern’s work received approval from the church conference in Wittenburg in 1848 and grew with the church’s blessing.

Fliedner was a pastor in Kaiserswerth in an area where Lutherans were in the minority and where the industrial revolution flourished because of the proximity to the Rhine river and its shipping possibilities. Many of Fliedner’s parishioners had worked in a silk factory which went bankrupt in 1822. On a trip to England to raise support for his congregation, Fliedner became acquainted with the work of Elizabeth Fry, an activist in prison work and reform. Dovetailing with the concept of the Inner Mission, Fliedner and his wife Friedericka opened a halfway house for women prisoners in 1833. This was the first of many other “Fliedner” institutions that responded to the needs of those who were poor and marginalized. In an ingenious way, the Fliedners combined the needs of the poor with the need for status and support of the many unmarried young women to develop an approach to ministry that continues to this day. In time Theodore and Friedericka Fliedner recruited young women to become deaconesses, living together as sisters in a motherhouse and becoming trained to serve as nurses, teachers, counselors and other workers in the schools, hospitals, halfway houses, hospices, etc., developed by the Fliedners. Although Theodore was a Lutheran pastor, he chose to organize his deaconess houses and the institutions they staffed outside the official church structures. Initially the women did not take life-long vows but agreed to serve for five year periods. They lived a common life, receiving no salary, only pocket money. (They could, however, keep any assets they had from their families, and a few of the sisters were actually quite wealthy.) They followed a strict routine of morning and evening prayer, long hours of work, and quiet times for meditation and devotion. They wore the dress of married women of their day, giving them status in the community. As long as they were affiliated with the sisterhood, they were promised a place to be in illness or old age.

In a very few years, deaconesses from Kaiserswerth were serving in hospitals and other institutions around the world. Deaconess houses after the Kaiserswerth model were springing up throughout Germany and other European countries where protestant (especially Lutheran) Christians were found. The concept was also exported to other places in the world—the Americas, Africa and Asia. Most of these motherhouses were organized into the Kaiserswerth General Conference, an association that continues into the present and includes deaconess houses, diaconal institutions, and other service communities.
Today in Germany, the direct descendents of Wichern’s brotherhoods are called deacons. They are now officially ordained by the church, and both men and women can belong to their association. They rarely serve a liturgical function and continue to serve in a variety of social service agencies, often in leading positions as administrators and managers. Perhaps the reluctance of the German churches to utilize deacons liturgically is rooted in Martin Luther’s opinions expressed in opposition to what he considered the abuse in the Roman Catholic Church where deacons had liturgical duties but ignored the needs of the poor.

Approximately 70 motherhouses in Germany are part of the Kaiserswerth Verband, an association of communities rooted in Fliedner’s model. A few groups continue to follow the original Kaiserswerth rule including the traditional garb. Most of these groups have become sisterhoods of aging and retired deaconesses who fill the institutions which once served the larger community. They have become communities of prayer and support rather than communities of active workers. Other groups have made changes in their understanding of their orders or communities. While they maintain a sense of community and connection to the original motherhouse, they no longer live a common life. They may marry. They receive salaries for their work and make contributions back to their motherhouse. They are not expected to wear the traditional garb but are identified with a special pin or insignia. (Some of the groups have made scarves or blouses out of the materials of the traditional garb.) Most often they make a commitment to a rule of life that includes diaconal service and spiritual practices. Some of renewed groups also include male members. Usually the rite of entrance to these sisterhoods or communities is consecration. Within the communities, however, members may also choose to become ordained deacons or even ordained pastors.

NORWAY

In Norway also, the early establishment of diaconates were rooted in the model of the German Inner Mission and Kaiserswerth motherhouse. The first leader of the deaconess motherhouse Lovisenberg, established near Oslo in 1868, was a woman trained at Kaiserswerth. Similarly a house, “fatherhouse,” (Diakonhjemmet) for training male deacons was established in 1890. Several other centers for diaconal work were founded around the same time throughout Norway. The deaconesses were trained primarily as nurses, although some worked with children and in education and social work. Some of the men were also nurses; others were social workers. Until recent times, these diaconal centers were the primary institutions educating deacons (both women and men) for the Church of Norway. Some of these deacons served in large parishes; others worked in various educational, health care and social service agencies both operated by the church and organized independently. More recently, diaconal education has been centralized but the diaconal communities remain intact in conjunction with the diaconal institutions they once staffed. In some cases, the deaconesses (sisters) have felt disenfranchised and cut off from setting policies and making decisions about the institutions they once “owned” as legal responsibility has passed to boards of directors and executives who are not part of the deaconess communities.

Stimulated by the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and spurred on by the ensuing ecumenical dialogues especially between the Anglican churches of the United Kingdom and the Lutheran churches of Northern Europe, there has been a lively discussion lasting several decades in the Church of Norway about the diaconate and its place in or relation to the church’s ordained ministry. The diaconate has been a major topic in the consultations which resulted in the Porvoo Communion, of which the Church of Norway is a part.

Early on in the Porvoo conversations, the churches committed to working toward a common understanding of diaconal ministry. The Council of Bishops of the Church of Norway were not agreed about the ordination of deacons. Part of this disagreement was rooted in the theology of ministry growing out of the Lutheran Confessions, that is, that there is only one ministry—the ministry of the Gospel—and that that ministry is located in the ordained pastor/priest. The debate was further fueled because of a pietistic strand in the church of Norway which saw no problem with holding worship services and even celebrating Holy Communion without ordained pastors. And because the Church of Norway is a state church, there were legal ramifications for making deacons part of the ordained clergy.
While the documents of the Church of Norway (for example, Plan for Diakonia, Church of Norway National Council, 2007) agree that diaconal work is part of the nature of the church and an important component of the ministry of every congregation, for several decades the language was intentionally ambiguous about the ordination of deacons. The documents leave open the possibility that deacons are part of the church’s ordained ministry as well as the possibility of deacons being a lay ministry. The church strongly encouraged employment of deacons especially in larger parishes, and every diocese and the National Council were required to have a diaconal adviser. In addition, it was deemed appropriate for deacons to be engaged by a variety of diaconal institutions and agencies with formal and informal connections with the Church of Norway. Even the liturgical rite authorizing deacons leaves open some ambiguity. The Norwegian word *vigsling* is used and does not correspond with ordination or consecration but is a more general term to include authorization of all orders of ministry—priest, deacon, bishop and cantor. Cantors are not seen to be part of the ordained ministry of the church.

The *Plan for Diakonia* indicates that the presence of a deacon in a parish is important in implementing the church diaconal tasks which are identified as:

1. Loving your neighbor
2. Creating inclusive communities
3. Caring for creation

The role of the parish deacon sometimes is to provide direct care, for example, counseling, advocating, ministering to ill and homebound. The deacon also plans, coordinates, directs, trains, etc., for effective diakonia by the members of the congregation. The deacon may also serve in a liturgical function, especially in the “high mass.” For these tasks, deacons are educated both theologically and professionally. They are then authorized by the church for this ministry in a rite of “vigsling” which may or may not be ordination.

At the same time there remain several communities—sisterhoods and brotherhoods—which are associated with the historical centers of diaconal work. Both men and women may belong to these communities or orders. In some of the communities some members have also been “ordained” deacons and some are ordained as pastors/priests.

**SWEDEN**

Unlike most other Lutheran churches, the Church of Sweden ordained deacons for about a hundred years after the protestant reformation. For some, the diaconate was a transitional state on the way to being ordained priests. Some men remained deacons, often assisting the bishop or priest. Their work was not charitable in nature but was seen as a liturgical-pastoral order. In the hierarchy of ministry, deacon was considered inferior to bishop and priest. In the mid seventeenth century, the Church of Sweden stopped ordaining deacons.

In the nineteenth century, there was a revival of *diakonia* in Sweden. Following the German model, four deaconess motherhouses were established between 1851 and 1923—Ersta, Stockholm in 1851; Samariterhammet, Uppsala in 1882; Vårsta, Härnösand in 1912; and Bräke in Göteborg in 1923. There was one institution for men founded in 1898. This community remained small, and most of the men were social workers in agencies and institutions outside the church.

The motherhouses were organized outside the official structures of the church and were never legally integrated into the official church. Priests of the Church of Sweden served as superintendents, and bishops often chaired their boards. They also received some funding from the church. As in Germany, the motherhouses founded hospitals, schools and social service institutions. Individual deaconesses often served as nurses or other staff in the institutions. They also served in parishes as nurses, teachers and pastoral caregivers. The motherhouses later became centers for diaconal training and theological study.
From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century there was discussion of other approaches to the diaconate that would not be communal and would be more integrated into the church’s ministry. The Church of Sweden also developed an understanding of diakonia, understood as care for people, as a core part of the church’s being and an essential function of the church. There was a desire to see the diaconal life of the church more closely connected to its liturgy. By 1942, the diaconate was seen as an office of the church and by 1987, the diaconate was acknowledged as part of the threefold ordained ministry—bishop, priest, deacon. Members of the deaconess and deacon communities could choose to become part of the ordained diaconate. Some did, and some did not.

Before 1987 the Church of Sweden used a variety of terms for different kinds of authorizations and inaugurations. Now, it is clear that the church ordains bishops, priests and deacons. They consecrate buildings and objects, and send out (commission) missionaries and others designated to various posts and positions.

Beginning in 1999, the office of deacon has been formally regulated in the ordinances of the Church of Sweden. In part, the ordinance reads:

The entire people of God is called to spread the gospel, all being members of one and the same body. Baptism is the basic consecration to service and to a share in the common mission of the church. Ordination takes place within the fellowship of the church and the ministry so conferred is exercised in the parish. The ordained ministry functions as a sign within the parish and community, a sign of the common task of the church and the responsibility borne by everyone who has been baptised. To call and ordain individuals to lifelong ministry is in order to build up the spiritual health of the parish and equip it for its mission in the world. It does not take away the responsibility from the laity but exists to enliven and promote the church’s mission in response to God’s call.

The office of deacon stands, in his/her work, as a sign of mercy in the parish and in society. The deacon has the responsibility of carrying out acts of love and mercy, particularly towards vulnerable people. The tasks vary, depending on local social needs, the structures of the parish and diaconal priorities. This ministry has its focus on works of charity and this can be expressed by teaching. Wherever there is human need the deacon should intervene and also encourage other people to take on responsibility.

Deacons assume various roles in the life of the congregations where they serve depending on local needs. They may be teachers, administrators, youth ministers, counselors, home visitors. They are most often involved in care of the elderly, work among children and candidates for confirmation, group and individual counseling, work with families, refugee work. They may also be involved in social work among people with addictions and those on the margins of society. Deacons are also involved liturgically in assisting at the mass—reading the Gospel, leading the prayers, and serving the chalice.

FINLAND

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland was also influenced by the German developments of diaconal communities. Several diaconal institutions following Fliedner’s Kaiserswerth model were established between 1869 and 1949. During this period, the diaconal work of the church was characterized by this model—training nurses (and some social workers) who worked primarily in the diaconal institutions.

Some deacons and other church leaders began around the turn of the century to question this model and suggested that diaconal work would be more appropriately located in the parishes. This proposal gained support, and in 1943 or 1944, the church decided that each parish would be required to create a post for one or more deacons/deaconesses. In Finland, the difference between deacon and deaconess is not related to
gender but rather to their education and function. Deaconesses (mostly women) are trained as nurses and may work in hospitals or parishes. Deacons (both women and men) are trained in social work and may serve in parishes or social service organizations in the community.

With the decision in the 1940’s came a period of renewal and redevelopment of the diaconate in the church. It also meant that the diaconate was now legally connected to the church and functioned within the church’s ministry. Deacons and deaconesses were set apart for this ministry by a bishop with laying on of hands and prayers for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Candidates were dressed in an alb and during the rite were given a stole; still the diaconal workers were not considered legally a part of the ordained clergy. Also this rite of entry was separate from actual deployment. Deacons and deaconesses may go into service in a parish or organization of the church, or they may work in some other institution or agency separate from the church. They go through the same entrance rite regardless.

The question of the diaconate’s inclusion in the church’s ordained ministry has been under discussion for several decades. A statement from the Bishops’ Conference in 1999 indicated that there were no theological reasons that would preclude deacons/deaconesses being part of the ordained clergy. Still several generations of study committees failed to settle the question. As late as 2011 no consensus had been reached.

Deacons/deaconesses in the ELCF are not given specific liturgical roles. They may assist with the distribution of communion, but any member of the parish may do so at the invitation of the pastor. The lack of a role in the liturgy is seen as a weakness in that the diaconal work is not connected with the liturgical life of the parish. The tasks of the deacon/deaconess are outlined as follows:

1. To develop diaconal work as part of holistic parish work, to identify where service is needed and the reasons which lie behind needs, and to seek ways in which the parish can help people in need.
2. To give direct help to those in need, to identify people’s needs and to provide care for clients in their own homes and at the deacon’s office during office hours.
3. To encourage parish members to take responsibility for others and for the environment and to lead them in the action which needs to be taken.
4. To train and support people (including diaconal lay personnel) in different tasks in diaconal parish work.
5. To disseminate information about diaconal work on different levels in the church.
6. To provide information on diaconal work inside and outside the parish.
7. To co-operate, in the vocational and voluntary field, with public social work and health care personnel.
8. To work on the parish board of diaconal work, to take the minutes of the board, make operational plans, and draw up annual budgets and reports of diaconal work undertaken.

Increasingly diaconal work has moved from health care toward pastoral care and focus on economic conditions and reacting to legislation and social practices. It has also been extended to international concern for human rights and economic aid. It is clear that the diaconate is moving into a more prophetic role in the church and society.

BRAZIL

The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) has since 1992 ordained diaconal ministers—men and women. The onset of this ministry is traced back to the beginning of the 20th Century when deacons and deaconesses came from Germany to serve the German immigrants who had begun coming to Brazil in 1824. The shape of the ministry was similar to that in the brotherhoods and sisterhoods in Germany, but the focus of the service was not so much outward toward the larger community but rather inward to those within the Lutheran communities. The Lutherans were a small minority in a Roman Catholic environment and lived somewhat in isolation from the larger society.

In a short time, because of the shortage of pastors, all of the male deacons were ordained pastors. Eventually in 1939, a deaconess motherhouse was founded at São Leopoldo following the Kaiserswerth model. The
Deaconesses trained there were highly regarded as good professionals and were recognized by some church leaders as carrying out an important ministry of the church.

Influenced by liberation theology, the leaders of the IECLB came to understand that the church’s mission was not just to their own people but was for the sake of the world. They soon found that *diakonia* was the term that captured their broader understanding of mission and ministry. For them this approach included: a reconnection of the spiritual and the secular; a relationship between theology and sociology, political science and economics; a methodology rooted in a cycle of praxis and reflection; liberation from the realities of poverty, oppression and exclusion; fuller participation of “lay” people in the church’s witness; and a prophetic dimension which speaks against unjust systems and structures.

In response to this expanded sense of ministry, the deaconess community began a course of study for diaconal ministry. At the end of the course, students (women and men) could decide to become part of the deaconess community or join a newly established diaconal community which did not have all the trappings of the deaconess order. Both the deaconesses and diaconal ministers were approved by the church and consecrated. In time, the deaconess community changed their lifestyle, allowing members to marry, be financially independent and choose their places of ministry rather than be assigned.

With the IECLB’s adoption of the statement *Shared Ministry* in 1992, the diaconate became one of four equal expressions of ordained ministries within the IECLB—pastors, diaconal ministers, catechists and evangelists. The deaconesses and diaconal ministers worked out a common order approved by the church in which men and women are called diaconal ministers. [The Portuguese is *obeiros* (male) or *obeiras* (female) for all ordained ministers; *diaconais* designates them as diaconal.] People in all four tracks of ordained ministry received the same basic seminary education. Students in each of the areas also receive courses in their own specialty. They have equal voting rights within the church, and they all serve with the same salary scale.

The Statute for Shared Ministry outlines the responsibilities of all ordained ministers as follows:

- Stimulating, preparing and enabling members to develop their gifts for the growth of the congregation, promoting human welfare and proclaiming the evangelical voice in public life.
- Providing theological orientation, advice and pastoral care to members.
- Promoting reconciliation between members.
- Visiting members and strengthening unity.
- Cooperating in missionary initiatives beyond congregational borders.
- Seeking the integration of the ministries through mutual respect, theological reflection and planning.
- Coordinating their ministries in cooperation with the congregational council.
- Cooperating in administration.

The specific responsibilities of the diaconal ministry are to:

- Stimulate acts of love and service to people in need.
- Promote diaconal spirituality among members.
- Form groups of solidarity or service in the congregation.
- Carry out diaconal activities in institutions such as hospitals, homes for children or the elderly and others.
- Participate in ecumenical activities that aim to protect human dignity and justice, supported by the congregation.
- Uphold congregational initiatives that aim to prevent or heal human suffering and remove its causes.
- Cooperate in the implementation of social projects.

The IECLB has established a Department of Diakonia which includes oversight of diaconal ministers as well as the church’s social service and health care work. Additionally, the department seeks to work with congregations in diaconal outreach. It was hoped that having ordained diaconal ministers connected with parishes would help congregations and all of their members become more involved in diaconal outreach to
the world. For a variety of reasons, there is still not full implementation of this shared ministry in the congregations of the IECLB.

Finances are a major consideration. First, is the cost of diaconal education for the church and for individuals who must add theological education to a university program that prepares them for their professions in social work, health care, etc. Second, is the cost to the congregation to employ a diaconal minister when many congregations find it difficult even to employ a pastor. One of the unintended consequences of the shared ministry is that some of the members of the deaconess community who are now also diaconal ministers have difficulty finding positions because the shared salary scale makes them too expensive due to their many years of experience.

Interestingly it has become clear that the diaconal communities or orders do not entirely coincide with the group of people who are ordained diaconal ministers. Some people wish to do diaconal work and belong to a community but do not wish to be ordained. There are some people ordained in the other three ministries who wish to belong to diaconal communities. And there are some diaconal ministers who do not wish to be a member of a community. Thus the relationship between the diaconal communities and the ordained diaconal ministers is still being worked out.

**INDONESIA**

Beginning in 1891, deaconesses from Kairserswerth, Germany came to Indonesia to work among the Batak people. In time the German deaconesses trained women in nursing and other professions and organized a motherhouse according to the German tradition. This was the foundation of the diaconate in the HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestant), but initially, the deaconesses were not structurally part of the church. They were, however, eventually consecrated by the church and recognized as well prepared for ministry.

This ministry was curtailed during and after World War II when German missionaries left Indonesia. Also the independence of Indonesia led to a desire and even necessity that positions in the church be held by indigenous people. The HKBP developed its diaconal work in the ensuing 20 years, but staffing the diaconal institutions was challenging. In 1952 three women were sent to Kaiserswerth for deaconess education. They were consecrated with their class at Kaiserswerth and returned to Indonesia in 1958. They were instrumental in forming a sisterhood at Balige in 1961. Deaconesses continued to go to Kaiserswerth for education also in other areas of healthcare (pharmacy, x-ray, nutrition, etc.) until deaconess education was officially begun in the HKBP in 1972.

In the 1970’s, deaconesses were accepted formally as part of the church, and they were consecrated by the church leaders. In 1983, the HKBP decided that deaconesses could be ordained. They received the same rights and roles as pastors, teacher-preachers and biblevrow (bible women). This led to some confusion as some deaconesses were given responsibilities to lead congregations, to preach and to hold pastoral services for women. The result was a blurring of the role of deaconess so that the service to the poor, marginalized, uprooted and oppressed people was diminished. This is being discussed in the HKBP because it understands there is a need for more leadership specifically and intentionally in the church’s diaconal work.

**EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has three “lay” rosters—Associates in Ministry, Deaconesses and Diaconal Ministers. (Associate in Ministry is a category established by the ELCA to include a variety of workers recognized by the predecessor church bodies [America Lutheran Church, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and Lutheran Church in America] such as parish administrators, parochial school teachers, parish assistants, musicians, etc.) Currently a task force has been studying these three so-called “lay” rosters and developing a recommendation for the next Churchwide Assembly in 2016 to combine the three rosters into one under the designation “Word and Service” with the title “deacon” to be used. Another task force is studying the matter of an appropriate entrance rite. This task force has just begun its
work and has not yet formulated any recommendations. At present, three diaconal communities serve the ELCA.

The Deaconess Community of the ELCA is the result of several mergers of deaconess communities and motherhouses. Their history is traced back to 1849 when several deaconesses came from Kaiserswerth, Germany to work in a hospital founded by Pastor William Passavant near Pittsburg, PA. There a motherhouse and diaconal institutions were established following Fliedner’s model—outside the official structure of the church. Similarly, a deaconess house with several institutions attached was established by John Lankenau in the Philadelphia area utilizing deaconesses from Germany. Over the next several decades, deaconess houses and hospitals sprung up throughout the USA—Brooklyn, Omaha, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Chicago and more—all organized on the German model. One exception was Baltimore where the General Synod actually established a deaconess house within the church structure.

In 1896, the Philadelphia motherhouse hosted a gathering of Lutheran deaconess motherhouses. At that meeting the Conference of Lutheran Deaconess Motherhouses in America was established. This group met regularly every one to four years to discuss concerns, to learn from each other and to cooperate in shared ministry.

Some of the deaconess motherhouses were short lived; other continued to operate for many years. Although none except the Baltimore house were integrally a part of the church structure, as the various Lutheran church bodies merged through the 1950’s and 60’s, there were also mergers among the deaconess houses. When the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) was formed, it included the Baltimore Synod, and the Deaconess Community of the LCA was accepted as part of the church structure. That community continued to be located in the Philadelphia area at Gladwyne, PA.

When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was formed, it recognized the Deaconess Community as a distinct roster of ministry in the church. Deaconesses were “set apart” for the Office of Deaconess until a new rite of consecration was established in the ELCA. In 2002, the deaconess community sold their property in Gladwyne (which housed their offices and retirement quarters for some deaconesses) and moved their offices to Chicago.

Lutheran Deaconess Association (LDA) was founded in 1919 in Fort Wayne, IN, also on the German motherhouse model. The deaconesses were initially trained as nurses and worked in the Lutheran Hospital next door to the motherhouse. Gradually the locus of service moved from institution to parish. When the hospital wanted to expand and use the deaconess property, the deaconess program moved to Valparaiso University in 1943.

While the LDA was structurally free standing, there was a close working arrangement for deaconess placement and rostering with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod during the 1950’s and 60’s. At the same time some congregations of other Lutheran church bodies began to employ LDA deaconess. In 1974 when the LCMS divided, there were LDA deaconesses serving congregations and ministries on both side of the divide. The LDA reaffirmed its free-standing and inter-Lutheran character and continued to educate deaconesses even as the LCMS started its own program in 1979.

On the one hand, the free-standing nature of the LDA allows more flexibility and freedom in both education/formation and places of service both inside and outside the church structures. It also allows for inter-Lutheran communities of deaconesses and deaconess. On the other hand, the LDA does not have access to funding and publicity through bodies. In addition, members of the communities who wish to be formally recognized ( rostered) in a Lutheran Church body are required to go through that church’s process. The LDA has to work harder to maintain relationships with the various Lutheran church bodies.

Today the LDA has deaconesses (and since 2014, male deacons) serving in six different Lutheran church bodies and in a variety of non-church positions. (The LDA uses the language of “one diaconate, two communities” for deaconesses and deacons. The education/ formation process and the areas of service are the same, and currently the women and men are in separate communities.) Nearly half are members of or
serving in the ELCA. Women and men become part of the LDA’s diaconate through the Rite of Consecration which is authorized by the LDA. Some who serve in the ELCA are also Commissioned Associates in Ministry, Consecrated Diaconal Ministers or Ordained Pastors.

**Diaconal Ministers** are one of the three so-called “lay” rosters of the ELCA along with Deaconesses of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA and Associates in Ministry. When the ELCA was formed in 1987, a task force was established to study ministry, especially with reference to the varied “lay” ministers who had served in the predecessor church bodies. The report and recommendations were presented to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly. At that time “Diaconal Ministers” became a roster of ministry in the ELCA. While ordination was discussed, the final decision was that Diaconal Ministers should be consecrated not ordained.

The decision included the following description:

…(T)hat diaconal ministers be called by this church to a public ministry which exemplifies the servant life, equips and motivates others to live it, and shares the Word of God in Law and Gospel through word and deed wherever possible and in a great variety of ways, in order to serve officially in interdependence with other laity, pastors, and bishops of this church, sharing with them responsibility for the Word of God in service to the church and the world, to empower, equip, and support all the baptized in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ—with an initial and illustrative, but not an exhaustive, list of categories of diaconal ministry to include education, mission and evangelism, care, administration, and music and the arts.

In subsequent years, the term “Word and Service” has been used to describe diaconal ministers while “Word and Sacrament” has been used to describe pastoral ministry.

**IN OTHER LUTHERAN CHURCHES**

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran church established the office of deacon as a permanent order in the early 1990’s. Deacons are one of three orders (also including bishops and priests) of the one ordained ministry. The church’s constitution describes deacons as assistants to priests, and most of them serve in small congregations that have no resident priest. The documents of the church primarily describe their liturgical functions which can include administering the sacraments.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) was formed in 1986 through a merger of the ELCC (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada) and the Lutheran Church in America—Canada Section. In the early to mid-1990’s a study of ministry resulted in the church’s establishment of a roster of diaconal ministers—women and men—who met certain education standards, had gone through a formation program, had received a call or appointment from a congregation, synod or ministry recognized by the church, and were consecrated by the church. The entrance rite was intentionally called consecration to differentiate it from the ordained ministry of word and sacrament. Among the diaconal ministers of the ELCIC are some members of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA and of the Lutheran Deaconess Association.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya has for the past twenty years educated and consecrated deaconesses to work especially with women, children and the ill, primarily in parishes.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania has at least two communities of deaconesses established by deaconess motherhouses from Germany. The sisters live a common life and serve in schools, health ministries and other agencies of the church. The deaconesses are not ordained although in at least one community one of the sisters has been ordained a pastor.

Lutheran Church of Denmark has had deaconess motherhouses and institution after the Kaiserswerth model since the royal family helped initiate them in the mid 1860’s. In addition to serving in institutions—schools, hospitals, infirmaries, homes for marginalized women and girls, etc.—deaconesses also served in parishes.
throughout Denmark. The Lutheran Church of Denmark did not sign the Porvoo agreement until 2010 and has been a late-comer to the related conversations about the renewal of the diaconate.

**The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland** formally established an ordained diaconate as a result of their involvement in the Provoo Communion. They formerly had a few deacons and deaconesses, but there were no official rules established by the church for them. The church established standards of preparation and opened a program for training deacons in 1993 at Reykjavik University. The adopted rite of ordination is used for both parish deacons and diocesan deacons.

**The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania** ordains bishops, pastors and deacons. Because of a shortage of pastors after WWII and to comply with laws of the Soviet Union, the church ordained pastor-deacons to serve in parishes when no trained and ordained pastors were available. About 30 years ago, the church began to study a more traditional diaconate and has begun to ordain deacons as part of a three-fold ministry.

**Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod** prepares deaconesses at both its seminaries and at Concordia University Chicago. The graduates are commissioned when they have received at least a one-half-time appointment in a congregation or other ministry approved by the church.

**Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church** in India has a community of deaconesses after the German motherhouse model.

**CONCLUSION AND PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS**

Can there be an “an order of ministry” apart from ordination? The Lutheran perspective and experience would suggest the answer is “yes.”

From my perspective, diaconates exist to help the church better live out its call to *diakonia*, that is to attend to those who are have the greatest need, who are most vulnerable, who are most marginalized or who would be easiest to forget. Sometimes the deacons, deaconesses, diaconal ministers are the “doers” of that ministry. They do the actual hands-on work. At other time they are primarily “equippers,” that is, educators, facilitators, cheerleaders, evaluators for the diaconal work of the whole people of God. At still other times, they serve as “icons” or living reminders that the servant Christ calls the whole church to *diakonia*. For me, the important question is: how can the church best shape ministry so that the diaconal mission can best be served?

One of the geniuses of the diaconate is, I believe, that it doesn’t always fit neatly into well-defined categories. Historically, globally and ecumenically, it has been somewhat “messy.” Sometimes it has been out in front, pioneering, leading the church where it needs to go. Sometimes it has needed to be adaptable, pliable enough to fill in those places when people have fallen through the cracks in the ministries of the church. And sometimes diaconate has needed to speak a hard prophetic word even to the church when it devalues or ignores its diaconal call or when the church itself becomes an agent of oppression. How can diaconal ministry be shaped so that it can remain pioneering, pliable and prophetic?

Those questions will need to be asked again and again in each new time and in relation to each new context.
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