

Serving *Christ* through Servanthood

The Vocational Diaconate

EMILY CHERRY

Upon their ordination, men and women who join the Sacred Order of Deacons are charged with the following:

God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.

At first glance, the ministry of deacons is pretty straightforward: They are called to serve. But for some, the vocational diaconate is still shrouded in a bit of mystery – and confusion.

The vocational diaconate is an order still relatively new in the Diocese of Virginia. To be a vocational deacon means that you are ordained to serve out your entire ministry as a deacon. Today, 14 people are vocational deacons, and 12 more – eight from Virginia and three from Southern Virginia – are in the process through the new Deacons' School (see article, p. 6). The first class of vocational deacons in Virginia entered the formation process in 2008, and the deacons were ordained in February 2011.

Change doesn't always come easily – particularly in a diocese as historic and steeped in tradition as Virginia. So the “new to us” order of the vocational diaconate comes with something of

a learning curve. How is a priest different from a deacon? What's the difference between a transitional deacon and a vocational deacon? And what is the role of the deacon in liturgy?

In this collection of articles in the following pages, we'll answer those questions as we share the powerful story of vocational deacons in Virginia.

BEYOND THE CHURCH WALLS

One of the primary roles of the deacon is that of connector. The Book of Common Prayer puts it like this: “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.” So the deacon lives out ministry inside and outside the walls of the church. “As deacons, we serve in the world,” says the Rev. Deacon Don Cady. “We bring the church to the world and the world back to the church.”

Prior to his ordination, Cady spent 43 years in the advertising agency business. But on a 2006 trip to the Holy Land with his wife, Deede, he felt a new calling – “an experience like I've never had in my life,” says Cady. With his wife's support, he entered the discernment process to explore the call to the vocational diaconate.



Photo: Emily Cherry

The Rev. Deacon Emmetri Beane proclaims the Gospel.

Our Homegrown Deacons

The Rev. Deacon Barbara Ambrose

The Rev. Deacon Emmetri Beane

The Rev. Deacon Don Cady

The Rev. Deacon Carey Chirico

The Rev. Deacon Mary Beth Emerson

The Rev. Deacon Christina Garcia

The Rev. Deacon Frederico Garza

The Rev. Deacon Marty Hager

The Rev. Deacon Holly Hanback

The Rev. Deacon Harrison Higgins

The Rev. Deacon Ed Jones

The Rev. Deacon Linda Murphy

The Rev. Deacon Kathryn Thomas

The Rev. Deacon Danny Wilmoth

The transition from ad exec to deacon was actually a bit more seamless than one might imagine. “In the advertising business, I was a salesman,” says Cady, which meant “having to understand dealing with people [and their] needs, hear what they have to say, and communicate back.” It’s a similar process in the diaconate.

Cady serves at Emmanuel, Greenwood, where he works in pastoral care and mission roles. His newest job at Emmanuel is to help plug parishioners in to different outreach programs. But his primary ministry as a deacon – and the area in which he seeks to connect church and community – is in veterans affairs.

Cady’s work with veterans wasn’t the first ministry path he explored as a vocational deacon. He had expressed an interest in creating an inter-connected network of Episcopal school chaplains. But the Committee on the Diaconate encouraged him to explore other options. So Cady got to thinking. He had a cousin who lost his life as a pilot during World War II, as well as a son-in-law who is a retired Navy SEAL and a son who is a career naval officer. “There is a huge community, particularly here in Virginia, that needs services for veterans” says Cady.

So Cady began volunteering at the local Veterans Affairs hospital, and talking with military chaplains and veterans in the Diocese. Today, he’s working on building resources and providing education for churches interested in serving veterans, active-duty military and their families.

What Cady emphasizes about his work – both in his specific ministry of veterans outreach, and in his more general ministry as a vocational deacon – is the importance of communication. “As a deacon, that’s what I’m called to do,” says Cady: “To hear people, to be able to hear directly what they say, and hear what’s behind what they say, and then pastorally to be able to respond.” Plus, he added, “We as deacons need to be out there telling our story.”



Photo: Emily Cherry

The Rev. Deacon Don Cady consults with Bishop Johnston.

SERVING THE HELPLESS

The Rev. Deacon Emmetri Beane’s story starts with her career as an attorney, where her focus was on families and children who were affected by poverty and legal troubles. “Even though I took early retirement due to illness, I never lost that passion for that population,” says Beane.

The Book of Common Prayer tells deacons that “at all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ’s people that in serving the helpless, they are serving Christ himself.” That’s a charge that Beane lives out in her ministry as a deacon at St. Gabriel’s, Leesburg. “All the ministries I work with kind of reflect the spirit of Matthew 25,” says Beane: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

At St. Gabriel’s, Beane focuses her attention on several ministries. Mobile Hope is a program that provides goods and services to the “precariously housed” – those who are at high risk for homelessness. She’s energized by Kairos, the Episcopal prison ministry, as well. She also identifies part of her job as helping others understand the unique order of the deacon.

“I’m excited about seeing my parish understand more about what the *diakonia* means in the parish context,” says Beane. “The way to show that is by living it out as one of them.” In other words, the best way to understand the ministry of a deacon is to see one in action. “I’m an icon of servanthood,” says Beane. “It’s not something you explain. It’s something you live.”

Cady and Beane are just two of the 14 “homegrown” vocational deacons living out their servant ministries in the Diocese of Virginia (see sidebar for the complete list). But for the entire group, an important part of being a deacon, as Beane explains, is the emphasis on process and journey. “I spend a lot of time prayerfully considering, ‘What is my ministry today?’ And that’s an important question we all have to ask. Not next month or next year – what is my ministry today?” And today, Beane says, “I am very content because I see God at work every day in what I’m doing.” +

A DEACON'S MINISTRY

We know that a deacon is a servant who connects the church with the world outside its doors. But how is that ministry unique to the diaconate? To get a better understanding, it helps to take a look at the Book of Common Prayer's description of the three sacred orders:

The Holy Scriptures and ancient Christian writers make it clear that from the apostles' time, there have been different ministries within the Church. In particular, since the time of the New Testament, three distinct orders of ordained ministers have been characteristic of Christ's holy Catholic Church.

First, there is the order of bishops who carry on the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the Church.

Secondly, associated with them are the presbyters, or ordained elders, in subsequent times generally known as priests. Together with the bishops, they take part in the governance of the Church, in the carrying out of its missionary and pastoral work, and in the preaching of the Word of God and administering his holy Sacraments.

Thirdly, there are deacons who assist bishops and priests in all of this work. It is also a special responsibility of deacons to minister in Christ's name to the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the helpless.

(BCP p.510)

During the liturgy, you'll see deacons take on roles that are emblematic of their calling and that represent a specific aspect of their ministry to the world.

Deacons **proclaim the Gospel**, leading and inviting others to tell the story of Jesus to the people among whom they live.

Deacons **set the Eucharistic table**, acting out their servant ministry by laying out the holy food and drink so that people may be strengthened to carry Christ out into the world.

Deacons **give the Dismissal**, reminding us that the people of God are to go out into the world and serve.

Still confused? Then keep reading. In the pages that follow, we unpack a set of commonly perceived myths about the vocational diaconate, and give you a glimpse of the new Deacons' School program.



DEBUNKING THE MYTHS ABOUT THE VOCATIONAL DIACONATE

ED KEITHLY

Deacons are a 'step-down' from priests.

This is the most prevalent myth about deacons. Deacons are a unique order with a unique call to serve the poor, weak, sick and lonely. They are called to and ordained for the special responsibility of interpreting to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. In turn, deacons move the Church to respond to those needs.

All deacons are on their way to becoming priests.

The transitional diaconate is a step toward ordination as a priest, typically lasting six months. On the other hand, vocational deacons are formed specifically for that order and will always serve as deacons. Some in the Episcopal Church believe that the transitional diaconate harms the vocational diaconate and petition General Convention to end the practice, as it perpetuates the idea that the diaconate is a step toward the priesthood, rather than a unique order.

A chaplain is a deacon.

Some deacons serve as chaplains, but chaplaincy is not necessarily a diaconal ministry. Chaplains do vital work, typically in an institution like a hospital or school in ministries such as one-on-one service to the sick and seeing to the welfare of the community. However, a deacon's ministry is to bring the Church to know and serve the needs of an underserved community. For example, a deacon might educate her parish on the needs of the local homeless community and organize the parish to begin a feeding ministry.

Deacons' primary ministry is in the liturgy.

The deacon's role in the liturgy is important, but the essential ministry of the deacon is his work in the world. During a service the deacon reads the Gospel, sets the table and gives the dismissal. Each of these roles symbolizes the deacon's role in the world: to proclaim the Gospel, to be a servant-leader to those in need and to send the Church into the world to do Christ's work.

Deacons are paid for their ministry.

Deacons are not paid by the church they are assigned to because a deacon can't be expected to be prophetic – to speak hard truths about the Church – if they are looking to the Church for their livelihood. Some deacons work as church professionals, but they exercise their diaconal ministry somewhere besides their workplace. For example, the Rev. Deacon Ed Jones serves as the secretary of the Diocese, but serves as St. Mary's, Colonial Beach's deacon, and the Rev. Deacon Holly Hanback serves St. James', Leesburg, as deacon but works as the director of youth ministry at St. David's, Ashburn.

Deacons are called to parishes just like priests.

Deacons are assigned to a parish by Bishop Johnston and serve directly under his authority, whereas priests are typically called by the parish to serve. This is not to say that deacons are assigned without considering the parish. Bishop Johnston makes assignments based on a number of factors, including the needs of the parish, the particular gifts of the deacon and proximity. Deacons typically have a letter of agreement signed by the deacon, the bishop and the rector of the parish they serve, outlining expectations about how the deacon will carry out his or her ministry in that parish.

THE DEACONS' SCHOOL

A new approach for an ancient order

ED KEITHLY

When the Diocese of Virginia and the Diocese of Southern Virginia set out to create a new, joint formation program for deacons, they were very clear about what the two dioceses needed.

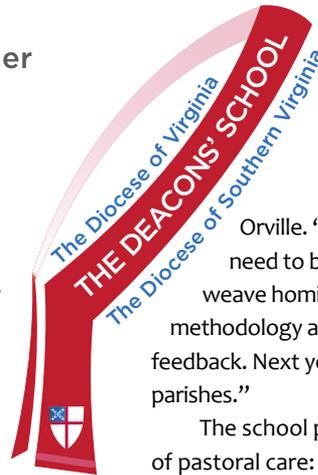
“Bishop Hollerith and I knew that we needed a program that would intentionally prepare deacons for the unique nature of that order, rather than a variation on seminary education for priests,” said the Rt. Rev. Shannon Johnston, bishop.

The Rt. Rev. Susan Goff, bishop suffragan, who served as canon to the ordinary during the early stages of the development of this program, added, “We knew we had to maintain a healthy balance between rigorous formation and recognizing the reality that our postulants for the diaconate typically work full time throughout their formation, typically continue to work full time outside the church when ordained, and typically are not paid for their ministry in the church.”

What resulted was the Deacons' School, a program designed by the Rev. Lynn Orville in consultation with Virginia and Southern Virginia. Through a grant from the Jesse Ball DuPont Fund, Orville was hired as a curriculum consultant to develop the school and serve as dean and administrator for the first two years of the program.

The curriculum will focus on seven core subjects: Scripture, theology, Church history and tradition, homiletics (preaching), pastoral care and human awareness, ethics and liturgics. Each unit will look closely at how deacons' unique call informs the way they approach the subjects.

“Because an essential role of deacons is proclaiming the Gospel, we want our deacons to be able to handle Scripture and theology with accuracy, to be able to talk about who God is, what He has done and continues to do in the world,” said



Orville. “And in order to proclaim the Gospel, deacons need to be good preachers. The school works to weave homiletics work throughout the program, teaching methodology and giving opportunities to preach and receive feedback. Next year they’ll begin preaching at their internship parishes.”

The school prepares deacons for the everyday realities of pastoral care: “We will spend a good amount of time on personality theory and learning what makes people tick in order to equip them with practical pastoral care skills for a variety of settings, whether that be in a hospital or a food pantry,” said Orville.

“As community leaders, deacons need to be able to articulate what is ethical and how we make ethical choices,” said Orville. “For example, if a church is given a bequest to begin a feeding ministry, deacons will face ethical choices about how to spend the money and how to discern what’s right for their community. The school will equip them to make those choices.

“Deacons model their servant ministry to the Church through liturgy. It’s important that we prepare deacons to understand and plan liturgy so the church can see them as effective servant-leaders,” said Orville.

“But most importantly, the school plays on and contextualizes the strengths of its students, who come to us with a wealth of experience, so that they can learn to use their strengths to serve God and His people as deacons,” she added.

“One of our students is a business owner and a registered nurse. So when we talk about how she might combine what she’s learned in the Deacons' School with her professional skills to create a health ministry, we move from the abstract to a real possibility of how Virginia and Southern Virginia’s deacons might continue to heal a hurting world.” +

Visit us online:
thedeaconsschool.org

More Info

- The Deacons' School consists of nine weekend retreats meeting quarterly, spanning just over two years. The first class of the school will be ordained in early 2016, God willing.
- Each student studies an average of 10 hours per week.
- In their second year, students will serve in a practicum placement, where they will average about 10 hours a week doing diaconal work at a church other than their church home.
- The Rev. Lynn Orville, dean, developed the spiritual direction curriculum for the Diocese of Nebraska and has served as a reader for General Ordination Exams for 11 years. Her thesis at Virginia Theological Seminary developed a new approach to adult spiritual formation that combines research on adult learning styles and spiritual development theology. She is putting that thesis to use with the Deacons' School.
- Although the next class will not begin until 2016, the diocesan discernment process is not on hold. The Committee on the Diaconate continues to hold postulancy interviews and Bishop Johnston continues to grant postulancy.