



διακονεο

GREEK: TO BE A SERVANT; TO SERVE

THE ASSOCIATION FOR EPISCOPAL DEACONS | ENGAGING THE DIAKONIA OF ALL BELIEVERS

NOVEMBER 2016

Cross-Diocesan Formation & Joint Ordination

On April 16, 2016, the first class of graduates of The Deacons' School were ordained. The School is a collaboration between the Episcopal dioceses of Southern Virginia, Southwestern Virginia and Virginia. Theresa Lewallen shares her thoughts as a newly ordained member of the first class.

BY DEACON THERESA LEWALLEN

In January 2016, my eight classmates and I celebrated our graduation as the first class of The Deacons' School of the Diocese of Southern Virginia and the Diocese of Virginia. The establishment of the Deacons' School was the result of the work of a Cross-Diocesan Committee on the Diaconate, a 15-month exploration by the two dioceses to establish a joint diaconal formation program. When the Committee began its work in late 2011, the two dioceses were at different stages in their histories of the diaconate. Deacons had been ordained in the Diocese of Southern Virginia for over 30 years. By contrast, the Diocese of Virginia had begun its inaugural formation program for deacons in 2008. Virginia ordained its first deacons in 2011 and a second cohort in 2012.

With the help of a grant from the Jessie Ball DuPont Foundation, the two dioceses hired the Rev. Lynn Orville to design a curriculum to "address the particular needs of deacons in formation...oriented to the work of the deacon as conscience of the Body of Christ and as catalyst between the Church and this broken world and is both practical and rigorous in scholarly requirements."

The 25-month Deacons' School curriculum is based on the canonical requirements for diaconal formation.

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It includes nine quarterly weekend classes with required reading, papers, and projects. The second year of the program includes a twelve-month parish internship during which we complete a

parish assessment, learn to serve liturgically, and work with parishioners to develop a ministry or project that will be sustained by the parish after the completion of the internship. Classes were held at Shalom Retreat Center, geographically within the Diocese of Virginia and at Chanco on the James, in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

My classmates and I received our acceptance notices in October 2013 with the first homework assignment – reading the entire bible and journaling reflections about each book. This assignment helped us begin to reorder our lives as we prepared to add ten hours of schoolwork each week to our seemingly already full schedules. The opening weekend in January 2014 included opportunities to learn about and from each other and to articulate any hopes and fears we had about entering this phase of our response to God. Early on, we recognized the need to stay connected with each other, checking in through phone calls and emails. Eventually



we added a Saturday gathering each quarter to discuss homework and life. For me, the 90-mile trip to Richmond for these gatherings was an important opportunity to process and reflect on the changes we were undergoing. We also worked on class projects during these gatherings.

During my exploration of where God was calling me, I found the Association for Episcopal Deacons online. I read through some of the resources and watched a video about the diaconate made by the Diocese of North Carolina.¹ These resources confirmed for me that the diaconate, which was under study in my diocese, was what God intended for me. My familiarity with the website and AED's resources came in handy for our group project on the history of deacons in the church.

At each class, a deacon from one of the dioceses participated so that we could experience deacons serving liturgically and preaching. They talked about their roles and responded to questions. My classmates and I learned from each other and the deacons about the differences between the two Dioceses, including liturgical preferences, differences between the two discernment processes, and the views of the diaconate. Communication and timing differences sometimes raised concerns among us. The two dioceses also differed in their methods of determining internship placements. All of us were required to serve our internship in a parish other than our presenting parish. Some were placed by the diocese while others of us had the opportunity to interview for and request a specific placement.

To help us understand our own diocesan processes, one of our class weekends included a session led by diocesan staff. The session provided the nuts and bolts of each diocese's candidacy process, expectations regarding our placements after ordination, and the timing and format of our canonical exams. The highlight of our liturgy course weekend was time with the Rt. Rev. Herman (Holly) Hollerith IV of Southern Virginia and the Rt. Rev. Susan E. Goff of Virginia who discussed their expectations of deacons, the theology of the role of deacons in specific liturgical rites, and their hopes for deacons. While my classmates and I had, sometimes, focused on the differences between our two dioceses, the discussion with the bishops reminded us of the similarities, of the truth of our unity in Christ and our shared heritage.

After a few Deacons' School classes, we began to ask our dioceses to consider ordaining us together. Our unprecedented joint ordination took place on April 16, 2016, with the Rt. Rev. Holly Hollerith IV (Southern Virginia) and the Rt. Rev. Shannon S. Johnston (Virginia) presiding. As the ordination procession formed, the class gathered on the lawn in a circle for prayer, giving thanks that we had been brought together,

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through God's grace to serve God's people.

Many of us stay connected through email, phone calls, and visits. We have a tentative plan to have a reunion gathering before the end of the year. I am grateful to have served as the deacon on staff for the opening weekend of the new class of The Deacons' School (now a program of the three Virginia dioceses). As I participated in the weekend, I reflected on the ways my own formation was enriched by participating in a cross-diocesan program and my growth deepened because of my classmates from the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

Theresa Lewallen serves at St. Alban's, Annandale, VA. She works for The National Collaborative for Health Equity as Senior Program Director, Culture of Health Leaders National Program Center.

¹Video from North Carolina. www.dionc.org/Diocese/hearing-a-call---deacons.html

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