

THE STORY OF THE CHALLENGE

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History written by those who participate in it is always risky. The risks come from two very human factors. This is a narrative about which I have very strong feelings.

Objective

reporting, it is not! But passion does not necessarily erase all rationality. Indeed, there are very few totally objective reporters, and I, for one, am increasingly suspicious of those who make such claims. My passions and prejudices will be clear and obvious. Anyone who reads this is free to fire at will.

The second risk is that memories, without written documentation, of events nearly twenty years ago need to be checked with other witnesses. I do not admit that the memories of others might be better than mine, but they might throw a new and different light on one of the great recent disappointments in United Methodist Church polity. From the flurry of Study Commission activity and promotion, it seems to me that we are bent on obscuring the basic issues and problems of our ecclesiology and polity in an avalanche of theological rhetoric and status-quo logic.

My saga has three settings. The first was a meeting of Deaconesses and Home Missionaries in the spring of 1973. I think it is fair to say that it was at that meeting 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. The second scene took place in the year before the 1976 General Conference. My memory focuses on a time of genuine ferment and openness to change, in which important new ideas were beginning to emerge. The final saga begins with a committee vote which stunned THE CHALLENGE and left the church with the present missional anomaly from which it is still trying to recover.

For me, it all started with an invitation to make a speech to that group of Deaconesses and Home Missionaries. To be perfectly honest about it, I expect that they had really wanted to hear Professor Albert Outler, but he had shovel-passed it to me. The 1972 General Conference had passed the Doctrinal Statement on which we had worked together, with a written signed vote which registered only 24 "Nos" out of nearly a thousand delegates. Something in that report or its presentation must have told this little group that the history of ministry had something more for them than their current position on the very fringe of the ecclesiastical establishment.

I think it was something of an ego-thing for me to be asked to address a group of Christian workers who were searching for new identity and pride for their important work. The ego drive forced me to go back and read a great deal of the history of deaconesses -- the whole world history of the diaconal movement from the stories of the Book of Acts on. I confess that my strongest previous encounter with deaconesses had been in my father's church in Providence when I was a boy. I remembered that they were always so important to his ministry, but that they seemed to need to move on so often. I had learned that far back that while we gave strong support and rather good fringe benefits to our Pastors and Associate Ministers who were ordained and full members of the Annual Conference, these deaconesses had at least as high a level of devotion, at least as good training for the work of ministry in that downtown church, but that they certainly never had the "perks" which went with "real ministers."

Aside from that very ad hominum understanding, there were, by the early 1970s, written resources of great and important magnitude. In the light of the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics were opening creative training centers for the preparation of Permanent Deacons. That seemed like such an important and hopeful sign, and it gave us a good paradigm on which to work. The World Council of Churches had all manner of important and helpful new studies on the nature, work, and effectiveness of ministry in different settings. When I started to write that speech, I was soon confirmed in all manner of lingering suspicions concerning the nature of ministry as viewed in a larger context, the

relationship of clergy and laity, and the explorations being made in the Church outside my experience of a good and strong local United Methodist Church in Peoria.

United Methodists have often given the impression that they do theology and planning for ministry in some sort of vacuum; or at least that the insights which were rushing in torrents on the rest of the Church simply would not work very well in our very special environment. It seemed clear to me, however, that at least from scripture, from our tradition and from the needs of the church, there was a need for significant changes away from our highly triumphalist understanding of presbyterial ministry (the elder) as the only form of really authentic ordination. As I re-read the text of that 1973 address to the Deaconesses and Home Missionaries, ("A Permanent Diaconate, A CHALLENGE TO THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH", RWT, 1973), I must admit that the influence and even many phrases of my dear and cherished mentor, Albert Outler jumped out at me. I must have had more conversations with him than I now remember.

The paper had four parts: Section One: TOWARD A MORE FLEXIBLE AND FRUITFUL MINISTRY, THE PERMANENT DIACONATE, outlined my thoughts on some new understandings of the nature of ministry and the relationship between the "cleros" and the "laos" for the sake of more effective work. It pointed to two special parts of that need. First, we had "a lack of appropriate Provisions for authentic 'serving ministries' (diaconia)." At this point, it was important to note that in the life of the Christian Community as well as the lives of individual Christians, the work of serving and caring for the special needs of those about us was not an optional course, but as central as reading and studying scripture and receiving the sacraments.

The other issue which was equally obvious was the practical one. While nearly everyone talked about the importance of these ministries of loving compassion and service, there are few if any organizational provisions for the care of these ministers. That seemed especially odd in the light of the fact that elders in full connection form as strong a labor union as there is in this country in the protection of their benefits in housing, pensions, hospitalization

and other non-salary items which make it possible to live on a considerably more modest salary than other professionals in the community. Deaconesses and others to whom I was speaking were asked to take even lower salaries, and to expect none of those fringes enjoyed by members in full connection.

The response on the part of the first hearers to this first section was one of quiet and rather grim acquiescence. They had heard all that before, and were personally more aware than I could ever be, but here was one of "them", a high steeple pastor with a hopeless senior pastor mentality voicing the same serious and obvious problems.

The second section, entitled A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE aroused a much different response. Very briefly, I had written the most obvious account of the Biblical and historical background that supports a notion of an order of DEACON which had integrity on its own rather than simply being a stepping stone to the position of Elder (or Presbyter). This would give a significant and permanent place in our ecclesiastical hierarchy to these marginalized folk. From the rather pedestrian insights with such limited scholarship, there was an instant response. It seemed clear that they had previously bought into the mythology that both God and Mr. Wesley had written the status quo, and if they did anything to disturb it, they were at best unbiblical, and at worst trouble-making heretics. Seldom has such a brief historical survey done as much to liberate a group of God's servants.

By far the longest section of that speech was entitled: TOWARD A 'PERMANENT DIACONATE' IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH. Having noted that there were no biblical or historical/theological hindrances to such an exploration, I went straight to the suggestion that we have come to the point when "a separate and distinctive diaconate would go far toward meeting an urgently felt need." The next paragraph suggests that "any such 'reform' must obviously be conceived as part of a truly comprehensive re-evaluation of the entire problem of the ministry as a whole." Did that suggestion prove to be prophetic for me! The proposal suggested quite naturally that we must begin with the ministry of the laity, who are called by their baptism to manifold ministries of worship, nurture, witness and service...

the people of God must be led in their common life in the body of Christ by representative persons."

What seemed radical to those first listeners was the notion that the most basic preparation for the ministry of the Elder in our polity was done in Probationary Membership in the Annual Conference, and that the ordination to Deacon's orders was more or less an appendage to that membership. Probationers are "on trial" as to their effectiveness in ministry. But the work of diaconal ministries "are no more elective in the Christian Church than the pastoral ministries..." In other words, ordaining persons to be deacons before they become elders had little or no bearing on the ongoing need of enabling the laity in diaconal ministries themselves. Someone, I argued, really needed to be going about that task, and since they were doing the work, they might as well go for the status as well.

Concerning the possibility of a PERMANENT DIACONATE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, I wrote "Nobody now knows exactly what this should mean and there is no simple blueprint that could be translated into appropriate legislation for the next General Conference." Then, very naively, I suggested that once the idea was grasped and "once the inertia of our accustomed distinctions is consciously redirected, once the possibilities of the experiment are even partially envisioned, there is no good reason why new forms and patterns may not be developed." Anyone might have known that the drag of inertia coupled with the strongly vested interests which are challenged by such a plan, will never give ground very easily.

The outline was as bold as it was naive, seen in the light of subsequent developments: "A PERMANENT DIACONATE... coordinated with and equal to the Pastoral ministry, in equivalent professional competence and appropriate ecclesiastic status." Permanent deacons would be persons professionally trained for their service specialty and accredited by the appropriate agencies in their several fields. The most important provision, however, was that it ought never to be conceived chiefly in terms of private services rendered by this or that individual. "The deacon, like the elder, should understand himself/herself as an enabler as well

as agent... and again, like the elder, representative of the church as a whole and therefore accountable to the church for the representations."

Reading those proposals in the light of 20 years of development, it is little wonder that from the clergy establishment, eager to protect the status quo, there was such inertia. When first suggested, the ideas seemed quite revolutionary and exciting to those engaged in ministries which most of the establishment had chosen to forget or, at best, put rather far back. The key themes were the concern to establish the enablement of serving ministries among the laity as being of central importance and not simply peripheral; and the concern that we be as moral in the treatment of the enablement of these ministries as we insist congregations be with their pastors.

The final section of the 1973 CHALLENGE was entitled THE POSSIBLE STRATEGIES AND PERSISTENT QUESTIONS. The Strategies were three simple suggestions. First, find natural allies in such an enterprise. To Deaconesses and Home Missionaries, add Christian Educators, Church Musicians, Church Administrators and Health and Welfare Workers. Each group had some sort of association for those in like ministry and each of them were rather completely separate from the larger whole. Second, it was suggested that they get the discussion going in the major publications of the denomination, so that others could talk about this as well. Finally, it was clear that it would be necessary to formulate a response to the Ministry Study Commission who were engaged in just such a study.

No one of these obvious steps were taken without some stumbling. I had neglected to mention a large group of potential allies: the Church and Community Workers who were structurally related to the Board of Global Ministries (as were deaconesses) rather than the Nashville part of the United Methodist curia. As we will see, that was a rather bad oversight. The discussion in major church publications never did amount to much; and the formulations for General Conference legislation were part of the larger story which will be the substance of our next section.

Finally, that paper listed seven persistent questions which are virtually the same ones that are still being raised by those who want to be sure that no significant changes ever take place to shake our time-honored system of ministry. The key issues have to do with the nature of Conference Relationships, the relationship to the local church, questions of the meaning of ordination and the question of fringe benefits. I do not claim any significant insight informed the framing of these persistent questions in this initial suggestion of a permanent diaconate for United Methodists, but I do suggest that it is essentially these so-called “practical questions” which had made it impossible for our denomination to move even in an experimental way toward any basic re-formulation in serving ministries and the questions of ordination

The next two scenes in this saga are mercifully and tragically much shorter than the first. Here again, my report will chronicle activities and actions in which I was personally involved and again, they are subject to all the possible distortions of human memory to which I refer earlier. I do not see myself as another Luke, gathering together all the eyewitness reports of those things which have happened among us; but as one who had a very intentional, joyous and, on reflection, inadequate part in the saga, when we look at it from the standpoint of the CHALLENGE for a Permanent Diaconate.

In January of 1974 I began my work as Associate General Secretary of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry, and took leadership in the Division of Ordained Ministry. That division was responsible to provide staff assistance for the Committee to Study the Ministry -- the fifth or sixth such commission in the current history of Methodists and then United Methodists. While much of the commission was engaged in the much juicier question of financial support for our Schools of Theology, and in particular the request of the 1972 General Conference that there should be one less Seminary on the eastern seaboard, a smaller and less well known group, began to work on exactly what I had earlier forecast. I had earlier written that any discussion of a Permanent Diaconate "must be conceived as part of a truly comprehensive re-evaluation of the entire problem of the ministry as a whole."

The study was wide indeed. A totally different study group was working on a reconceptualization of our understanding of the office and work of the Bishop. The Episcopacy Study Commission noticed that the then Chapter Two of the Book of Discipline (the 1972 edition) was simply entitled THE MINISTRY. It began with one paragraph on the Ministry of all Christians, and ended up with all of our canonical mandates for the office and work of bishops. Why not a totally separate chapter on Bishops, they suggested. GREAT! Then another Chapter for the Ministry of all Christians which would come first, and a third Chapter on the Ordained Ministry.

So paragraph 301, eleven lines on the Ministry of the Baptized was expanded into the new Chapter One concerning the responsibilities of all the baptized. For the first time that Chapter made a formal Disciplinary distinction between the general ministry of all Christians and the REPRESENTATIVE MINISTRIES OF THE ORDAINED. It was the first time such a distinction was voiced for United Methodists, although most of the rest of the Christian Church had been talking that way for a number of years. Since I did virtually all the original drafts on that document, I know that it had a good bit of its genesis in that earlier document which had been presented to the Deaconesses.

The new Chapter, now called ORDAINED MINISTRY, introduced the concepts of Candidacy for Ministry to take the place of the old License to Preach as the first formal step toward ordained ministry. It introduced the category of Honorary Location, changed our nomenclature from Special Appointments to Appointments Beyond the Local Church, and again gave authority to those who were under episcopal appointment to do the sacraments in the one appointed location, for one year and under the direct supervision of the DS. I cite these very significant changes among many others, simply to illustrate that this Ministry Study group had lots of very tough arguments coming before them.

Once it was decided that there would be an opening chapter on the Ministry of all Christians, and a Chapter on Episcopacy and the Ordained, they thought it was very logical that there also be a separate chapter dealing with the ministries of Deaconess, Home

Missionaries, Consecrated Lay Workers -- in other words, those who were neither clergy, bishops or "just lay-folk" (the latter category is perhaps the worst bit of ecclesiastical heresy I know, but it was common among people that I talked to.) Against the advice of leaders who thought gradualism for the consecrated lay workers was the way to go, I formulated for the committee a draft for a new Chapter Three that would establish a PERMANENT DIACONATE differentiated from and parallel to the Elder, in enabling the deaconal ministries of the laity. It seemed to be logical that this really massive restructuring of our understanding of all the ministries of the denomination should include this as well.

The period between January of 1974 and February of 1976 (when the report to the General Conference Delegates had to go to the printers) was hectic beyond all belief. I personally took all these proposals for massive changes in the forms and regulation for ordained ministry to Boards of Ordained Ministry all over the country. I think I met with 43 of the 73 Boards, and sent the draft proposals to all the rest. It was, as they say, a full and frank exchange of high and. lofty theological conceptions of ministry as a whole and of the ordained, as well as the down and dirty questions of practical applications for those who would need to carry out all these new regulations for Candidacy and steps into the ordained Ministry. In sharing with all of these groups of clergy the first drafts of the paragraphs on the Ministry of All Christians, there was rather good agreement. Although, as Emory Buck would later say on the floor of the Conference, it was "just theological stuff, and had no place in the Book of Discipline." The only real fight on this section in the legislative Committee on Ministry came because there had not been equal study of this section by certain leaders of our Theological Seminaries, and they seemed to feel left out. But then, with Albert Outler on the same committee, that was never a fair fight. The section gained strong approval.

The rest of the report would not do as well as that opening theology of the Ministry of all Christians. Boards of Ministry and the General Conference delegates who come from those power centers were very concerned about the new legislation on steps into ordained ministry. That theological section was pretty standard stuff, but since it entailed no new requirements for

church membership, training, or discipleship, it went by with the normal yawn which even good church theology is normally accorded. When groups from the Boards of Ordained Ministry came to discuss the permanent Diaconate, the typical response was something like: "oh, that's interesting!" Because I am a hopeless optimist, I always prefer the Lukan text which reads "he who is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). In matters that affect voting on issues that touch our long standing traditions, it is probably best to go with that other rendering: "He who is not with me is against me." (Luke 11:23).

There was one rather important precinct which had not been cultivated. Large numbers of those who might well have been included in a Permanent Diaconate were functionally related to sections of the Board of Global ministries. (As were the Deaconesses, albeit rather unwillingly). For reasons I have never quite understood, those people harbored a strong and glowing anti-clericalism. I think they must have believed that ordination was a kind of disease which rendered its subjects into stuffy hierarchical traditionalists, who were the natural born antagonists of any sort of avant-garde ministries. Anyhow, it seemed clear that since they were generally negative about the whole concept of ordained ministry, they certainly wanted no part of anything akin to ordination for any of "their" people. That opposition was not crucial, but it did raise questions as we entered the last scene of my saga.

The last scene takes place in what was then called the Kern Room in the building that housed the Board of Higher Education and Ministry. It was sometime in February in 1976, with the deadline for the printing of material to be submitted to delegates of the General

Conference already long overdue. The Episcopacy study had already gone to the printers, and it was clear that there would be controversy about that. The major sections, which specified the changes in the Elder in full connection with the Annual Conference, were not only voluminous but also controversial. More importantly, they had to do with the "real" ministry of the church. The whole section of theological understanding of the nature of the General Ministry was approved easily since it was only theology, and really didn't seem to have much

bearing on important legislative issues. Only the matters of THE DEACON were left, and with it were those PERSISTENT QUESTIONS, practical questions unresolved...

I knew that we had not done adequate homework for this part of the legislative report. There were no Boards of Ordained Ministry or other power centers to deal with questions of the Ministry of Deacons, as there were to deal with the questions of the ordained. They had virtually no pressure to do anything. Those involved in ministries of service and caring do not often become General Conference Delegates, and even their friends are not powerful and in high places. The real debate took place over the question of deleting the section requiring ordination as a deacon along with probationary membership in the Annual Conference. The staff report suggested that all the necessary tests and inquiries as to one's fitness to enter ministry could more easily be done under the rubrics for probationary membership, and then the order of Deacon could be freed from its second-class status to become parallel and complementary to the Order of Elder or Presbyter.

There was a likely debate, but it was clear that for several of those who were most influential in swaying opinions of others, this was a virtually new idea. "How could the church survive without DEACONS?", one committee member asked incredulously, "Do mean that we could actually do away with the Order of the Deacon?" "No indeed," was the reply, "then we could have Deacons that really meant something." My most vivid memory was of one of my dearest friends in the Council of Bishops. It was he who had given me my first really important chance at leadership in the Church, but he was clearly troubled by our lack of total preparation for this bold new move. The Church had had deacons since the time of the Bible, how could we vote to do away with them now? I insisted that we were in fact returning them to a status much more akin to that described in our scriptures. He remained unconvinced and concluded that our scholars needed to do much more study of this question before we were ready to make such a radical move. I responded in some pique that the whole academy had never found it important enough for one monograph or dissertation to be written on the entire question of the status of deacon in the United Methodist Church or any of its

Predecessor organizations. Deacons, as presently constituted, are simply a second-class preparatory order without any status, and virtually no meaning for our polity.

There were 25 members present and voting that afternoon. Even to this day I have no trouble remembering the crucial vote. The vote was to eliminate the present Order of Deacon so that the name and order would be used in some way for the whole group of professional church leaders who had many functions including musician, educator, administrator and deaconess, but no significant recognition, authorization or adequate support from the denomination or its local units. Twelve voted to eliminate deacon as a stepping-stone to elders' orders; thirteen voted against, including all of the Bishops who were members of the Commission. It failed!

My confession is that I remember feeling grateful that we had won so much on really important new and creative descriptions and regulations for entrance into the ministry of Word and Sacrament and Order. Over the years I have felt saddened and ashamed that we had not then adequately prepared a case creditable enough to be presented to the General Conference.

The final irony came in the mopping up of the legislative details which were to be presented. our fall-back point was to suggest a consecrated office of Deacon and leave ambiguous for the time, the question of how consecration of deacons fits with ordination of deacons. After all, we consecrate Bishops with prayer and the laying on of hands. We certainly might make something special of Deacons without dealing with the questions (at that time) of conference membership, guaranteed appointments and the other practical considerations. But someone pointed out the anomaly of having ordained deacons who were just on the way to becoming Elders, and consecrated Deacons who were really doing the work of Deacons in their vocation and in enabling the laity. I remember that someone was being kind and deferential to me, since it was clear that the notion of an ordained Permanent Deacon had been an important part of this whole new vision of ministry, "We have to get another name, you can't call both DEACONS." I looked at a draft of the first paper I had written in 1973 and hoped for practical wisdom, if not divine guidance on this new compromise. There, on the last line of the first

page, was the sentence, "The facts, undeniable but largely ignored, call more urgently than ever before for a radical reconsideration of the basic order (and it was underlined in my text) of the diaconal ministries of the UMC by all..." "Call them Diakonal Ministers" I suggested. I remember thinking that was a really bad response (I knew that Albert would be terribly disappointed that I had flubbed this one so badly). But in the broadest kind of rationalization, I thought, "That title and the whole idea is so anomalous that it certainly will be changed in the next quadrennium, and by then all the unresolved practical questions will also be worked out."

Well, they haven't been worked out. The challenge is still there. We have not made the work of Christian Service in love and compassion to the needs of the world. more significant. Our clergy are still working on Word, Sacrament and Order, but the enablement of the service still seems very optional in the lives of many Christians. Perhaps it may be that the example of service-oriented students whom I see on our campus, may shame Christians into being more like the sheep in the last part of the 25th chapter of St. Matthew. That would be a great switch! Those who work to enable the ministries of service and love in so many different ways are not any more prominent in our leadership than they were before. They must struggle as individuals for the benefits which every Conference Member is assured. And now I often hear my colleagues among the full members say that the whole movement is only to gain status and recognition and "perks" for Diaconal Ministers. I should have thought that we might have wanted to do that because it was the right thing to do. And we want those ministries that enable service and justice to be right up there with those ministries that encourage Bible study and sacraments.

The premise on which I began to think about the challenge of a PERMANENT DIACONATE as important in moving us toward a more flexible and fruitful ministry was in this sentence: "Everyone agrees that there is an urgent need for revitalization in the ministry and in our understanding of ministry in the United Methodist Church." I feel badly that the practical concerns which are shared for the ministry of DEACONS (in the Biblical sense) have

not been dealt with adequately. I am concerned that in our general loss of identity as a denomination, we have also lost the urgency for revitalization of the ministry.