Acknowledging the 20th Anniversary of the Renewed Diaconate in the Uniting Church in Australia

“Diaconal Ministry and the reshaping of the mission of the church: Twenty years of the Renewed Diaconate in the UCA”.

Pilgrim Uniting Church
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1. Introduction and connection with title of lecture

Many thanks for the invitation to make this presentation today. It is good to be in Adelaide.

I’ll begin by offering a quote about the ministry of a deacon by a fellow deacon who lives and works on the other side of the world:

The natural place for a deacon to be, suggests Rosalind Brown, a Deacon in the Church of England, is on the margins, able to ‘occupy space on the boundaries, to be ... at ease alongside people who are at the edges of church and society’.¹ This is not because they might have a preference for this particular lifestyle, but because the church itself expects them to be there ‘simply because God is there’.² ³

I want to commend the South Australian Historical Society and DUCA South Australia for being willing to mark the 20th Anniversary of the formal renewal of the diaconate in the Uniting Church in this way. It is very encouraging for those of us involved with the renewed diaconate, but also significant because the renewal of the diaconate grew out of a conscious effort on the part of the church to highlight that an appropriate engagement with God’s mission is at the heart of how we are to understand the church and its mission.

I was heartened that in some of the conversations regarding the purpose of this presentation it was stated that the policy of the Historical Society is that history is not just an interest in the past – but that historical reflection best responds to contemporary issues. It is these contemporary issues that I believe the renewed diaconate is well placed to respond to.

Thus, it is good to be able to reflect with you about some of the ways that the renewed diaconate can contribute to a reshaping of the understanding and practice of the mission

¹ Rosalind Brown, Being a Deacon today: Exploring a Distinctive Ministry in the Church and in the World (Norwich, Norfolk: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2005), 33.
² Ibid., 31
of the church, and perhaps also more truly claim its mandate to help lead the church in this missional reshaping.

Much of the focus of this presentation this afternoon will be on the renewal of the diaconate within the UCA, and developments which stemmed from that. The content of the presentation is based very much on work I did for my doctoral thesis entitled *De-Centred Ministry: a Diaconal View of Mission and Church*. The basis for this research was a belief that mission must be at the heart of the life of the church, and further, that the mandate for the ministry of the Ministry of Deacon was to both embody and lead the church in God’s mission in the world. *Diakonia*, upon which the ministry of Deacon is modelled, is central to how we are to understand both the church and its mission. Of course, Deacons are not the only ones within the life of the church who engage in mission or who model *diakonia*, but their special calling means that they have a mandate to ensure that it happens.

A sub-title for this presentation could be summed up in the words of a little known 19th Century Dutch Theologian, the Rev J.C. Sikkel, who, in 1890, suggested that “The church can live without buildings. Without *diakonia* the church dies” (Rev J.C. Sikkel, 1890). Some years later, in response to the unjust social conditions of his day he pleaded with those in the church to ‘stop locking up the Gospel in your church’ and called for a public display of Christian social justice. By the standards of his day such comments would have been considered quite radical; sadly, I suspect, the same might be a reflection of the church today, more than 100 years later.

**2. Background to me and the research project**

Before going any further I want to offer some background to myself.

My present ministry location is as a Patrol Minister with Frontier Services, working in the High Country Patrol in far eastern Victoria. I have also had Placements at the Theological College in Melbourne, and as a congregational based Deacon working in outreach ministry in one of the growth corridors in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. Prior to ordained ministry I was a Youth Worker, firstly with the YMCA in a variety of settings and then with the church.

I was one of the first deacons to be ordained in the Uniting Church after the formal renewal of the diaconate in 1992 (*ordained in December 1992*). Whilst I was a student at the

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Theological College in Melbourne during the latter half of the 1980’s many of the debates about the renewal of the diaconate were taking place. I was able to contribute in part to some of these discussions. I was a member of what became known as the ‘Lavender Committee’ *(named after the chair of that committee, Charles Lavender)* which reported to the 1988 Assembly *[held in Melbourne]* and a consultant to the Task Group which presented the *Report on Ministry* to the 1991 Assembly *[in Brisbane]*. I also had the opportunity to see first hand some examples of diaconal ministry in other countries, such as England, Scotland, Canada, America, and the Philippines.

It was through this experience with our own discussions and similar discussions happening in some overseas churches that I realised greater attention needed to be paid to the ecclesial nature of this ministry we had spent so many years debating. The Uniting Church already had a very strong foundation for an understanding of a renewed diaconate in the previous ministry of Deaconess, but we needed to move beyond some of the constraints that were placed on the understanding and practice of that ministry.

It is important to realise that whilst we were discussing the possibility of a renewed diaconate similar discussions were taking place in various churches overseas. The movement into a renewed diaconate within the Uniting Church was not something that was occurring in isolation, nor was it unique to our country or situation. This is important to remember lest there be a tendency by some to think that the Uniting Church was departing from ecclesial understanding and practice within worldwide ecumenical discussion. The journey we were on in the Uniting Church was being shared by our diaconal colleagues in different parts of the world where significant reflection on this ministry was taking place. Different scholars⁶ in places such as the United States, Britain, Sweden, Europe and Australia were engaged in this reflection, of course much of it reflecting their own denominational background.

Most scholars acknowledged the part that the World Council of Churches’ discussions had on the ecumenical and international movement towards a renewal of the diaconate in its various forms. The 1982 publication of the World Council of Churches’ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) document states that ‘today there is a strong tendency in many churches to restore the diaconate as an ordained ministry with its own integrity and meant to be exercised for life.’⁷ This document goes on to affirm that

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⁶ Eg. Sven Erik Brodd, Birgitta Laghé, Benjamin Hartley, John Collins, Rosalind Brown, Ronnie Aitchison, Christine Hall, Gunnel Borgegård etc.

Deacons represent to the church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life.\(^8\)

Here is an attempt to express a renewal of the diaconate in terms of re-orienting diaconal ministry away from understandings of individual charity responses towards seeing the diaconate as an essential expression of the life of the whole church. The BEM document encouraged a theological and ecclesiological shift in thinking and approach in relation to how the ministry of Deacon should be understood. Deacons were not to be seen as the ones to ‘do the charitable work of the church, rather [they were] to act as a focus for the [ministry] of the whole people of God.\(^9\) Along with worship and witness, diakonia is to be seen as being central to any understanding of the church and its mission.\(^10\)

3. A Short History of the movement towards the renewal of the diaconate in the Uniting Church in Australia.\(^11\)

This is a good point at which to remind ourselves of some of the history and development of the renewed diaconate in the Uniting Church. We have just celebrated 35 years since the formation of the Uniting Church, and this year marks 20 years since the formal renewal of our church’s diaconate. Both milestones are worth celebrating, but let’s remember that in both instances, the journey has really only just begun.

The journey of the three former denominations into Union in June 1977 is significant in understanding the place of the diaconate within Uniting Church structures today. The Basis of Union affirms that one of the hopes of those who dreamed of the formation of the Uniting Church was that this new church would reflect more truly the church’s place within a contemporary Australian setting. At the time of Union it was recognised that a new faithfulness was called for, a faithfulness that would enable the church to find its own centre in Australia, rather than to feel constrained by practices and understandings that had their basis in a different time and location. Questions such as, how are we Christian in this place called Australia, what is our relationship with the ‘First People’s of the country, what is our relationship with others who come after us, and what is our relationship with the land were all of vital importance as this new church took shape. The Uniting Church

\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^10\) McRae, 34.
\(^11\) For a more detailed overview of the history, see Bev Fabb, in Catherine Ritchie. Not to Be Ministered Unto ... The Story of Presbyterian Deaconesses Trained in Melbourne. Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1998.
was seeking to discover its own sense of a faith-in-location and to discern what being 'church' meant in this new time and place.

This context is important for understanding the place of the renewed diaconate in the Church. Whilst each of our Union churches had a more or less well-established form of diaconal ministry, the writers of the Basis of Union recognised the need to reconsider traditional forms of ministry, including a more contextual understanding of the existing ministry of Deaconess. They foreshadowed the possibility of a renewed form of this diaconal ministry in the Basis of Union. Paragraph 14c states that:

The Uniting Church recognises that at the time of union many seek a renewal of the diaconate in which men and women offer their time and talents, representatively and on behalf of God’s people, in the service of [humankind] in the face of changing need. She will so order her life that she remains open to the possibility that God may call men and women into such a renewed diaconate: in these circumstances she may decide to call them Deacons and Deaconesses, whether the service is within or beyond the life of the congregation.

In his commentary on the Basis of Union published in 1980, Davis McCaughey points to the significance that this part of the Basis of Union may have on our understanding of the diaconate and of our understanding of mission and church. Seeing diaconal ministry as being one amongst a number of expressions of ministry, McCaughey affirms that the church is to see to it that those people with the charismata, or gifts of grace, for diaconal service are trained in and for the sake of the mission of the church. He states that

The gifts are not identical with those of other ministries: indeed it is part of the theological principle underlying our understanding of the church that they should be different, distinctly characterising particular people.

These gifts, bestowed through the work of the Holy Spirit, and recognised as such by the church, underline that ministry in its various forms is to be constitutive of and not merely derivative from the church’s being and identity. The church orders its life so that some of its members take on representative functions for the sake of the whole. In the case of deacons this representative function is in order to help identify the nature of the church’s own mission and thereby enable the mission response of the whole. Thus, for the church to be church it must be focussed on mission, responding to God’s calling-out of its people to life and witness within and for the sake of the world. Moreover, the Basis of Union

12 The Presbyterians from 1898, the Methodists from around the 1930’s [although a group of young women known as Sisters of the People, were established by the Wesleyan Central Mission in Sydney in 1890 was a forerunner for the Methodists here] and the Congregationalists [although very small in number] from a similar time [and of course from about the 1920’s/30’s the Congregational Church began ordaining women.]


14 J. Davis McCaughey, Commentary on the Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Church, 1980), 77,78.
affirms that this witnessing church will need to find a true rhythm of Christian involvement in the world both as a community of faith which is gathered for worship, and as the people of God scattered for everyday life in the world. Its service is rooted in worship and as the Body of Christ it is to be a sign and instrument of God’s grace available for the whole of humanity. It reminds the church that its ability to be a living community determines the manner in which it is possible to be Christ’s *diakonia* in and for the world.

The basis for a renewed understanding of diaconal ministry was therefore the church’s own commitment to mission. Moreover, it meant an approach to mission that had at its heart an appreciation of the new context of the church, recognising that in order to faithfully respond some revised approaches and structures were called for. Much of this background was outlined in the *Report on Ministry* presented to the 1991 Assembly. This Report made recommendations about all ministries within the church, but particularly about both ministry of Word and ministry of Deacon.

The 1991 *Report* envisaged a renewed diaconate whose members, to be known as Deacons, would be a ‘sign for the congregation...of the presence of God in the world’, holding before the church the model of Christ’s service as being central to all Christian ministry’. It affirmed that a Deacon’s ministry is to be located on the ‘margins’. ‘Margins’ can, of course, be interpreted in a variety of ways and we need to be careful about who defines these margins and how they are defined.

Amongst other things, it affirmed that deacons in the Uniting Church are called to:

- Be, along with the scattered members of the congregation, a sign of the presence of God and God’s kingdom in the everyday world,
- Be especially aware of the places in the community where people are hurt, disadvantaged, oppressed, or marginalised and to be in ministry with them. (eg. see Matt 25:31-46),
- Recognise, encourage, develop and release these gifts in God’s people which will enable them to share in this ministry of caring, serving and justice in their everyday lives’
- Serve in the manner of Christ alongside marginalised people in solidarity with them as they struggle for human dignity and justice (Isaiah 58:1-12; Isaiah 61:1-3; John 8:2-11; Hebrews 13:1-3).

Of course, this does not mean that deacons are the only ones in the church who do this – we know that there is much more ministry and mission contained within the life of the congregation and community than deacons can possibly respond to. However, what the

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church is saying is that this is a particular responsibility of those who are called to be Deacons. Without their representative focus on these missional ideals a large component of the church’s life and identity becomes compromised.

All of this background is important because it helps us understand that the renewed diaconate did not just ‘appear’ out of nowhere; it emerged, essentially, as a gift God’s Spirit.

4. Brief overview of background and findings from my research.

By the time I started my research the renewed diaconate in the UCA was about 10 years old. The church was in the midst of a Review of the Ministry of Deacon, commissioned by the ninth Assembly in 2000. Even though it was still ‘early days’ for the renewed diaconate it was an appropriate time to look at how this renewed ministry was developing within the life of the church.

My thesis title was *De-Centred ministry: A Diaconal View of Mission and Church*. Drawing on the ministry experiences of deacons since the renewal of the Diaconate in 1992, the thesis affirms that the church’s diaconal ministry is essentially an ecclesial concept, representing to the church that *diakonia* is at the heart of its identity. Using key Assembly reports which remind us that deacon ministry is essentially a ministry on the margins, the conclusion was drawn that diaconal ministry can be seen to be a de-centred ministry. Using this concept of ‘de-centredness’ it highlights how the ministry of Deacon is best understood as being directed towards the needs of the wider community, finding its true home by operating on the margins of both church and community. It challenges us to move away from any temptation to see diaconal ministry as being merely a ministry of charity or of humble servanthood, and rather, to see it as an essential ecclesial concept that helps us understand more about the nature of the church, what is at the heart of the church’s own diaconal mission, and how and where the church is to be found. It invites the church to embrace the contributions that deacons make to the mission life of the church and to discover how, in their representative capacity, they can embody the *diakonia* of the whole church.

The work traced a basic history leading up to the renewal of the Diaconate, locating the beginning of that journey within the Church’s *Basis of Union*, as already mentioned (see
particularly paragraph 14 (c))\textsuperscript{17}. It draws on some of the key insights emerging from the international and ecumenical church regarding the place and experience of the diaconate within other church traditions. Some similarities with other denominations were noted, most particularly the shift to ground diaconal ministry more concretely within a theological understanding of what it means to be church, and how this ministry might carry a representative function on behalf of and for the sake of the whole church. It suggests that a more critical analysis of our understanding of \textit{diakonia} is called for as we further explore the ‘worship’, ‘witness’ and ‘service’ life of the whole church. The insight of scholars such as the Swedish theologian Sven-Erik Brodd and the Australian Roman Catholic scholar John Collins were identified as being important resources within this analysis.

I found the writings of the Swedish theologian Sven-Erik Brodd particularly helpful. Brodd is a priest in the Church of Sweden and Professor of Theology at Uppsala University. He has been involved in many of the recent dialogues regarding the diaconate in the Scandinavian, European and British churches. I was fortunate to be able to meet with him several times during a short period of study leave I spent in Uppsala in 2004. Brodd maintains that the diaconate is a representative ministry. Being one of the ordained ministries of the church, it is not the same as the general ministry to which all Christians are called through baptism, even if some of its tasks may appear to be similar. Rather, Brodd maintains, its shape and expression is to be determined by the nature of the church itself; it has no existence apart from the church because \textit{diakonia} is at the heart of the very nature of the church. It is, he maintains, an ‘indispensable element in ecclesiology and a necessary function of the Church of Christ’, simply because ‘the church [itself] is \textit{diakonia}’\textsuperscript{18}.

It was partly out of a desire to explore more fully this ecclesial affirmation about the ministry of Deacon being espoused by Brodd, and a variety of other theologians\textsuperscript{19}, that provided an impetus for the direction of my research.

The research was not intended to speak to any ministry other than that of the ministry of Deacon, though hopefully the insights emerging from it will be of benefit to the church as a whole. It sought to take seriously a challenge Dorothy McRae-McMahon put to deacons

\textsuperscript{17} I have chosen to locate the ‘beginning’ at Union, but of course, recognising the existence of the ministry of Deaconess in each of the ‘uniting’ denominations, much discussion about the diaconate was going on in the lead up to the formation of the Uniting Church, and also in the development of the content of the Basis of Union.


\textsuperscript{19} For example: Birgitta Laghé, Benjamin Hartley, Rosalind Brown, David Clark, Norma Cook Everist etc.
not long after the renewal of the diaconate when she said that ‘unless the diaconate enters into mission and ministry with the church rather than for it, … it will fall far short of its calling’. 20

The research was as much a personal journey as it was a collegial one and emerged from the perceived need to undertake an intentional reflection on the experiences of deacons in the UCA since the renewal of the diaconate. It employed a multi-faceted approach, using key elements of a Grounded Theory methodology to gather data. It invited deacons to reflect on their experiences of ministry with people on the margins, drawing out their insights on how their ministry informs an understanding of mission and church. The key research tools used were that of a questionnaire and a Focus Group. The Focus Group was made up of Deacons from a variety of settings in Victoria, while the questionnaire was sent to randomly selected Deacons across the country. Different settings where deacons were in ministry were identified, including Frontier Services, Presbytery, Synod or Assembly placements, Mission Outreach placements, Congregational based ministries and a variety of Chaplaincy settings (eg. prison, hospital, agency, schools etc).

Participants were invited to reflect on their ministry placement in the light of what the Uniting Church affirmed about the Ministry of Deacon using some of the key documents of the church, especially the 1991 Report on Ministry, and the Report on Ordination and Ministry presented to the 1994 Assembly. 21 Respondents were asked to answer a couple of specific questions in relation to how their understanding of both church and mission informed the practice of their ministry.

They were also asked to reflect on the sort of images which underpin their ministry and identify key biblical images and themes informing their approach to ministry.

The images emerging through the responses were categorised under headings such as, the deacon as: Companion, Servant, Liberator, Pastor, and Prophet with a variety of sub themes relating to each of these categories. Many of the Biblical themes offered in responses included references highlighting Jesus’ commitment to the poor, to outsiders, to the centrality of hospitality, to the challenges of perceived privilege, and the challenges

that the crossing of boundaries throw up for Jesus’ followers. The relationship between the nature of leadership and discipleship also emerged as being important.

The findings indicated that Uniting Church Deacons understand the church as being clearly ‘missional’, called to share God’s work in the world. They affirmed that God was at work transforming the world into a community of love, justice and peace and that we are all invited to participate in God’s mission (missio Dei). There was an awareness that this is an ongoing process and that we are continually being drawn into new encounters and understanding of a future defined by a resurrected Christ.

Those who are on the margins (however that is defined) were seen as being of particular concern for deacons as they seek to give expression to the ‘invitation of Christ to go into all the world’. One deacon spoke of ‘working the jagged edges’, another of being prepared to see the face of God in the people he encounters even if such encounters throw up disturbing challenges. Most understand the mission of the church to be broader than what is contained within the four walls of a building, or even in a particular denominational expression of church. They seek to respond to the call of the God who has already gone before them into places, for example, such as remote and isolated communities served by agencies such as Frontier Services, or within a community of people living with mental illness, or on the kerbside of a busy city street, and amongst many other places where people are vulnerable and God is to be found.

*The Church: Incarnational and Missional*

Based on responses from deacons the research explored some of the different ways in which we experience church, and how the church, as an incarnated community, is a sign of the kingdom of God and a work of the Spirit. It suggested that because the church has a commitment to ‘outsiders’ it must always allow itself to be challenged by the boundaries and to recognise that, in what might sometimes be disturbing encounters thrown up by an engagement with the boundaries, it will discover something more of what it is called by God to be.

Some of the responses spoke of insight and energy gained by encounters with those who are ‘outside’ the life of the church, affirming that the ability to listen to the voices and concerns of such people is critical because it is often through such encounters that we learn something new about ourselves, our mission and the nature of church. The story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-37 (see also Matthew 15:21-26) offers an example of how this encounter with outsiders might teach us something new about
ourselves and our mission. On the surface, this is a disturbing passage for the church. In it the familiar image of a compassionate teaching Jesus is turned upside down and we have instead ‘a portrayal of a learning Jesus’.

The courage of this woman is significant. She is clearly an outsider because she is a woman and a Gentile; thus setting up a double outcast scenario. Even though she was not invited into the community of Jesus’ presence, she has a sick daughter and wants Jesus’ help. When she is initially rebuffed she persists and is presented as challenging Jesus’ self-understanding of who he is and where his mission lies, such that she eventually gets what she came for; that is, access also to the realm of God’s kingdom.

Insights from Liberation Theologians

The research used insights from selected liberation theologians to highlight the implications of margins and the particularity of social location for mission. It affirmed the necessity of taking context and culture seriously as we explore the manner in which the church is called be involved in God’s Missio Dei. It maintains that the centre and edge must live in creative dialogue if we are to be a truly missional church and invites us to be open to the possibility that engagement with the margins may lead to a transformation at the centre of the church’s life. It affirms that the ‘de-centred’ nature of diaconal ministry has an essential role in offering an alternative view on where the church might find itself and of how it might continue to define, and redefine its life.

The research suggested that the commitment of the Uniting Church to renew its expression of diaconal ministry has enabled it to be clearer in its understanding of the representative function of an ordained diaconate. On the strength of this some conclusions were drawn about how we are to understand mission and church and the place of the ministry of Deacon as being one which will help lead the church to be more intentionally aware of the variety of contexts in which God’s church is found. It challenges the church to free its representative expression of diakonia to help lead it into renewed expressions of faithfulness, for the sake of the gospel. The thesis concluded by offering some challenges to the church and to deacons about how this might happen.

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5. Where to now: Challenges and opportunities

So, where to now? What are some of the challenges and opportunities? The renewed diaconate in the UCA is now 20 years old. Much has been achieved in that time, but of course many challenges remain.

Immediately after the renewal, and through the 1990’s, there was an influx of candidates offering for the ministry of Deacon. There was a lot of activity sorting out appropriate formation processes and attention was given to Placement processes that would value the distinctive focus for Deacon ministry.

Often it is hard for a small group of people to continue that sort of activity and attention beyond the initial 10/15 years. I suspect we have now come to a point where there needs to be a return to the sort of attention given to the ministry immediately post renewal. This is not necessarily a bad thing. A new ‘breed’ of deacon is being called by the church and they must be free to lead the diaconate and the church in ways which are faithful to the changing nature of the church and of society.

Having said that I think there are some theological and practical issues which will remain as challenges for the church and for deacons. In no particular order, these are:

First, deacons must form an identity based on ecclesial understanding. Any discussion about the diaconate and deacons must be based on a clear understanding that diakonia is at the heart of how we understand the church. Deacons are called to live out the diakonia of the whole church and to lead the church into its own diakonia. The ministry must have a clear ecclesial basis otherwise we are in danger of confusing what deacons are and do with any number of Social Work and community services activities, important as they may be.

Second, we need to take account of the influence of history and pay attention to the international scene as far as the diaconate is concerned. We need to know what has gone on in the past in order to understand some of the dynamics of the present and how to move towards the future. Remembering that the renewal of the Uniting Church diaconate did not happen in isolation will help us more confidently claim our place within our own denomination as well as the international and ecumenical scene. Important also is some knowledge of The World Federation of Diaconal Associations and Diaconal Communities and the responsibilities that go with membership of that body (UCA Deacons are members of the Federation). This body plays a very important role in international dialogues.
regarding the diaconate and contributes in a number of ways to the work of World Council of Churches.

**Third, deacons need to find an intentional location for ministry and develop a strong identity for ministry.** Being in areas where people are vulnerable, on the margins, outside of community, as the victims of injustice, in community development are all places where deacons can be found. We take account of those on the underside of the community and society. Our ministry does not need to be spectacular, but it does need to be faithful to the Gospel and our calling as particular ministers of that Gospel. It may require us to be in places that the church would rather not go, and for us to call the church itself into such places if it isn’t already there.

**Fourth, deacons should have a strong connection with a worshipping community.** It is difficult to see how deacons can do justice to their call to represent the *diakonia* of the whole church without having a strong connection to a local worshipping community. If *diakonia* is central to the church’s identity, as it is, deacons must also be in the midst of the church’s liturgical life in order to raise the diaconal consciousness of the worshipping community – and represent what is often referred to as a ‘double *diakonia*’ – from the church to the world, from the world to the church. In this way the deacon is a constant reminder of the church’s own identity.

There is a leadership role in worship for deacons as they also need to be good preachers and explore new ways of worshipping. We know that not all worship happens on a Sunday morning, or in a building called ‘the church’ – the church is more than that, and worship much broader than that. Nor should we assume that the people with whom a deacon is in ministry with will necessarily find their way into a local church congregation – they may, but probably not, as our symbols and imagery can be very foreign to those outside the church.

**Fifth, deacons are engaged in a ministry that takes time.** Ministry takes time; relationships take time to develop and trust to grow. This is probably not so much a challenge for individual deacons as I suspect most are prepared to be patient and take what time is needed. The challenge here is for the institution to be patient and allow deacon ministry to take the time that is needed. A deacon is a companion, and a ‘loiterer with intent’ – being a companion and a loiterer takes time.

**Sixth, deacons need to be formed appropriately for their ministry.** Davis McCaughey, in his commentary on the Basis of Union, and speaking of the possibility of a renewed diaconate, states that those people whom the church recognises as being endowed with
the special gifts and graces for ‘service for the needy world’ (p77) will be trained appropriately. If, as McCaughey suggests, there is a ‘theological principle underlying our understanding of the church that [these gifts] should be different, distinctly characterising particular people (p 77,78)’ then we need to ensure that deacons are formed in the best possible manner for their calling to this distinctive ministry.

Seventh, deacons need to have the freedom to be engaged in ministry on the ‘margins’ for the sake of the church. It is worth re-stating the words of Rosalind Brown, who reminds us that the natural place for a deacon to be is on the margins, able to ‘occupy space on the boundaries, to be ... at ease alongside people who are at the edges of church and society ... simply because God is there’ (Being a Deacon, p31,33). Most deacons understand this well, but it is worth reminding ourselves of it, as is the need to be careful about how and where ‘margins’ are identified. ‘Margins’ can take on a variety of forms and understandings – and they may not always be where we might expect them to be, as the challenge of the Syrophoenician woman demonstrates.

Finally, deacons stand under the authority and accountability of the church. Because they take particular vows at their ordination they are therefore under the authority and accountability of the church. Sometimes there is an uneasy relationship between deacons and the church. I don’t necessarily see this as a bad thing, so long as there is a willingness to respect differing positions. It is within both the character and mandate of a deacon’s ordination to call the church beyond itself. The challenge comes in discerning those times when this is the case, and maybe even living through the consequences of that calling and action.

If we remember that the diaconate is a ministry of mission, of prophecy and of transformation, as has been claimed then in order to be able to call the church beyond itself and into its own diakonia, we must also be able to stand under its authority. If we can stand both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the church in our ecclesial leadership then I think we are doing our job.

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In conclusion

The challenges and opportunities for the future are as much those for deacons as they are for the whole church. At the formation of the Uniting Church 35 years ago one of the essential questions asked was how, as a church, are we to be faithful to God’s call to be witnesses of the Gospel in this new social, cultural and geographic location that is our home. That remains a pertinent question for the Uniting Church today – how are we to be faithful to God’s call in a church and social and cultural environment which is different to what is was 20 and 35 years ago. It is also a continuing challenge and opportunity for Deacons within the Uniting Church in Australia.

And perhaps part of the challenge is also to know how we can respond to the affirmation made by the Rev J.C. Sikkels all those years ago that ‘the church can live without buildings. Without diakonia the church dies’. 24

Thank you for your time and attention.

Alison McRae
Adelaide
9 September 2012

Questions for discussion

What response do you have? (affirmations and/or questions)

What challenges remain for Deacons, and for the church?

Some useful UCA resources


24 Van Klinken, 26.
A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY


Alison McRae
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